

# MACABRE CADAVER

Tales of Horror, Science Fiction & Dark Fantasy

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**SCREAM QUEENS X 2  
EDITION**

ADAM BLOMQUIST  
LEE GIMENEZ  
ALAN KELLY  
PAUL PIOT  
DAVID BERNSTEIN  
TED MCAULEY  
DAVID MISIALOWSKI  
JEFFREY CONOLLY  
R. S. PYNE

DEBBIE ROCHON:  
THE HARDEST WORKING  
WOMAN IN HORROR

INTERVIEW WITH MELISSA BACELAR



# SABBATH

AUSTIN  
GALLO

DAVID  
CRAWFORD

BOBBY  
WILLIAMS

JOHN  
HOLMES

The first sinner has been  
shut out of hell...

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# CONTENTS

SANDBOX	
—Adam Blomquist.....	4
INTERVIEW WITH MELISSA BACELAR	
—Interview by Jeff Woodward.....	5
A SMALL SACRIFICE	
—Lee Gimenez.....	8
YOU HAVE TO DIG DEEP TO BURY YOUR DADDY	
—Alan Kelly .....	9
MESSAGE FROM A BOTTLE	
—Paul Piot.....	12
ANOTHER MAN'S WIFE	
—David Bernstein.....	14
DEBBIE ROCHON:	
THE HARDEST WORKING WOMAN IN HORROR	
—Interview by Adam Blomquist.....	19
HEATSTROKE	
—Ted McAuley .....	23
WE TAKE DEATH TO GO TO A STAR	
—David Misialowski.....	28
EIGHT BALL	
—Jeffrey Conolly .....	33
SKIN DEEP	
—R. S. Pyne.....	36



SOMETIMES WHAT YOU SEE ISN'T ALWAYS  
WHAT IT APPEARS TO BE . . . THIS BULLY  
SHOULD HAVE DONE A LITTLE MORE  
READING IN HIS SPARE TIME . . .

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# SANDBOX

## Adam Blomquist

---

ELEVEN YEAR OLD SADIE STEVENS SAT on the edge of the sandbox in Stockden's town park. It was bright and sunny and the park was full of kids, none of them near Sadie or *her* sandbox. She was making designs in the sand with a stick. She wore a red polka-dot dress that was besmeared with chocolate stains and had her blonde hair in two short pigtails. She had a stack of old looking leather bound books by her side.

"Hey slimy Sadie," hollered Brendan Bogdanovich, Sadie's sworn enemy, from the monkey bars.

Sadie messed up her nose and stuck her little pink tongue at him. She then lowered her head and continued scribbling.

Brendon dropped off the monkey bars and started stomping towards her. He walked straight through the jungle gym, over the low end of the seesaws, hopped on top of the edge of the sandbox then scuffed his way through Sadie's intricate designs.

"Whatcha got there Slimes," the boy asked. Not waiting for an answer he scooped up her books. Sadie kept her head down and continued unabated in her work, fixing the markings Brendon had ruined and tracing new ones around his feet. Brendon, oblivious, read the titles aloud.

"*Practical Ca...conjuring for Low Level Occultists. The Ne... necro...nomicon and You?*" Brendon was thirteen but his reading skills were far below Sadie's. "What is this crap," he asked, confused and insulted that little Sadie spent her time reading. He pitched the books onto the grass behind him.

"Are you even listening," he said. Sadie continued to write. "That that's not even a letter."

Brendon pointed down at the symbols, arranged now in a circle around him. They were strange some were triangular and sharp; some were accented with little stars.

"It's not English." Sadie said with a hint of playfulness in her voice.

"What you geeks invent your own language now?" Brendon grabbed Sadie by one pigtail and lifted her up to him. She just giggled.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Shouldn't say bad words."

"I'll say whatever the *hell* I want."

"Fine by me." Sadie threw a handful of sand in his eyes, sending him howling in pain. He wiped frantically at his eyes.

"You little bitch, I'm gonna."

Sadie calmly stepped out of the sand box and started to pick up her books. Brendon struggled to open his eyes and prepared himself to charge the girl.

Bending his knees to leap forward, Brendon fell face down in the sand, his feet cemented in place.

"What the," were the last words Brendon got out before he started screaming. Tentacles of sand held his wrists in place. The entire sandbox expanded into one gaping maw, complete with pointed teeth and prehensile tongues, and crunched down. There was a sudden gust of sand and Brendon was gone.

The sands returned to tranquility. The incantations gone, Sadie resumed her seat on the edge, opening up her book for a little afternoon reading.



“I THINK IF EVERYONE INVOLVED  
UNDERSTANDS AND LOVES WHAT THEY ARE  
WORKING ON AND IF THEY ARE GOOD AT IT  
. . . THE PIECE WILL BE GOOD.”

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# INTERVIEW WITH MELISSA BACELAR

## Interview by Jeff Woodward

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**T**HIS MONTH, *MACABRE CADAVER* HAD the opportunity to speak with actress/producer Melissa Bacelar. Melissa starred in such horror films as *Eat Your Heart Out*, and *Pink Eye*. Not content with being labeled as a “scream queen”, Melissa has a long list of acting credits, which included a recurring role on the daytime soap *One Life to Live*, and an appearance on *Saturday Night Live*. She also works with the ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) to help spread the word about animal abuse.

**Macabre Cadaver:** *You have been busy over the last year, at least four films have been completed, or are in post production. Are there any hobbies you manage to squeeze in between filming/writing?*

**Melisa Bacelar:** I am a DOG NERD! I wouldn't say it's a hobby . . . More like an uncontrollable passion. I love dogs, have 8 of them. When I am not working I am with my dogs, protesting puppy stores that sell puppy mill dogs (which are all puppy stores that are not HUMANE!) rescuing dogs, volunteering at rescue groups . . . You get the idea :)

**Macabre Cadaver:** *What made a girl from Jersey leave the Garden State, in pursuit of a career in movies, and horror movies at that?*

**Melisa Bacelar:** It's funny when people ask me stuff like this. It seems so normal to me? I can't imagine that anyone doesn't want to be in horror movies. So I guess the answer to that is that I really couldn't do anything else. Jersey is cool and I am glad I grew up there. It gave me an attitude and a love for big hair and too much makeup . . . These

things come in handy! But in the end . . . I belong in front of a camera with an axe in one hand and a bloody body part in the other.

**Macabre Cadaver:** *Tell us about the Network Studio.*

**Melisa Bacelar:** OK. . . In a nut shell. Actors need to meet people that cast movies and TV shows. Casting directors need to meet actors that they can hire for the projects. I just put them together at a place call The Network Studio. And I recently made these meeting SUPER easy by creating [www.TheActorsSource.com](http://www.TheActorsSource.com) Now anyone, anywhere, anytime can post their pictures and videos online and email them directly to major casting people . . . It's super cheap, super easy and you get to talk to the people who cast every major Hollywood star! I am kind of a genius . . . a genius with big hair . . .

**Macabre Cadaver:** *You produced and starred in Skinned Alive, a film about a flesh eating prostitute. Did any “johns” get hurt during your research for the part?*

**Melisa Bacelar:** Yes! My research was extensive and being the good Catholic girl that I am I couldn't actually sleep with these men so I had to kill them . . . Honestly it was kinda scary how easy it was for me to be really slutty and really violent all at the same time. I barely had to get into character . . . It all came very naturally . . . \*typed while smiling sheepishly\*

**Macabre Cadaver:** *You work with the ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). What are your thoughts on Breed Specific Legislation as it pertains to certain terrier type dogs that have been banned in cities*



*around the nation and world?*

**Melisa Bacelar:** I wish that we could ban people. Can we start doing that? I honestly think it is sad that we live in a society where we blame innocent animals for the things that humans do. These dogs are raised by egotistical people who need to have a mean animal by their side. So they take these very strong dogs and instead of training them in a way where they could live in society as loving and devoted companions, they are trained to kill each other. I would like to take these human beings and leave them in a small room with no love or companionship. I want to feed them just enough to keep them alive. Then I want to mutilate their bodies by clipping their ears so they can look as tough as possible. Lastly the only time I will give these people any positive reinforcement is when they kill another person like them . . . . Once I do that I will carelessly let these people escape from their rooms and they will probably kill helpless, undeserving people and then society will want to ban them . . .

It's just crazy that society allows criminals to walk among us after they have been "rehabilitated", but they won't give animals that are TRAINED any chance.

I have a pit-bull that I found on a highway facing traffic.



He was dirty and hungry. He was abused and beaten and had worms through his whole body. I got out of my car in traffic and coaxed him into my car. I have had him for 3 years and he is the sweetest dog you could ever meet. I have 7 little dogs that bite him and push him around . . .

People suck. They don't want to take responsibility for their mistakes.

**Macabre Cadaver:** *If there is a remake of Sleepaway Camp, would you be willing to play Angela, and give us that "surprise ending"?*

**Melisa Bacelar:** First of all Felissa Rose is DA BOMB!!! I had the pleasure of meeting and interviewing her for "The Scream" not too long ago and she is just the coolest chick ever!! I would be honored to play Angela but I think it would be difficult for me to be believable as a 13 year old girl? Who knows aren't the people on 90210 like 30 and playing highschool? You gotta love Hollywood.

**Macabre Cadaver:** *The horror genre seems to be alive and well, with many Indy production companies keeping the hack and slash coming for us fans. Is there a line you would draw when it comes to certain on-screen depictions of sex/violence in a film you would produce/star in?*

**Melisa Bacelar:** Ya know, that's kind of a loaded question. I have read scripts I don't like because the sex and violence is not written well. I have also read horrific,

awful, unimaginable sex and violence that is so well written I would go for it. I think if everyone involved understands and loves what they are working on and if they are Good at it . . . The piece will be good. I can't imagine ever hurting an animal in anyway. I would never be OK with that? Other than that . . . I feel horror is fantasy and it is meant to scare people. So, thats what we are here to do.

**Macabre Cadaver:** *You recently had a role in Creep Creepersin's Erection. The name itself looks like it was fun to shoot. Can you give a brief synopsis of the film, and about your part in it?*

**Melisa Bacelar:** LOL. Yep. This is a cute little story about a man who has a haunted penis. There is lots of blood, some nudity and funny twists. Creep is an interesting dude and he makes quirky, freaky films. It was fun. I play an office worker who is attracted to the star and when they start to get it on his penis bleeds . . .

**Macabre Cadaver:** *You have made the Comicon circuit in the past. What was it like being surrounded by some of the most creative people in the writing and art industry, and having them drool over your every word?*

**Melisa Bacelar:** Comicon is so much fun. My first year, I could not believe the costumes and swarms of people.

Every year is the same. I am just more amazed. It is an interesting mix of fans and the really cool part is that the people who are the artists, and celebrities are fans too. So everyone is having fun and geeking out. It's really cool.

**Macabre Cadaver:** *Lastly, if you have \$5, and Chuck Norris has \$5, who has more money?*

**Melisa Bacelar:** Uuuuuuuuu. Is this a trick question? Because I am blonde, and sometimes get confused. But I would say: If I had \$5 and Chuck Norris had \$5 . . . Chuck Norris would still have more money than me :)

*You can find more information about Melissa by visiting [www.melissabacelar.com](http://www.melissabacelar.com).*



I looked at my left hand, at the missing finger.  
The doctors used it to make my first ten clones;  
unlike for animal cloning, human cloning  
required larger pieces than single cells.

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# A SMALL SACRIFICE

Lee Gimenez

---

THE DAY I TURNED 18, I WENT TO the enlistment office and signed up. Growing up, every time I looked at the flag, I was proud and knew I wanted to serve. My father was military and so were my older brothers.

My first day in, I was issued Army fatigues, had an ID chip implanted in my arm and told to report to the C-Center. The Center was a typical military building, concrete block painted dark green.

"Steve Nichols, reporting," I said to the sergeant behind the desk.

She looked up and scanned my arm. "Good morning, soldier. Welcome to the Army. Have a seat. I'll call you when the doctors are ready for you."

For the next three months, we were stationed at Fort Marshall, home of the 85<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division. We went through Basic Training, then Airborne school. Finally, we shipped out to the war, ready and eager.

Today is August 3, a Tuesday. I logged on to *Theatre* program and closed the door to the computer cubicle. We're located in the Safe Zone, an underground bunker in Kandahar. The walls of the cubicle are covered with video screens I controlled from my computer. The satellite images are so good now I could read name tags on soldier's uniforms. I zoomed in on my squad, located near a cluster of buildings in a desert area east of Kamal Khan. Their mission is to observe and stop enemy troop movement. This morning, there's been no activity.

Suddenly, on the horizon, two Iranian helicopter gunships appeared, approaching fast.

"Choppers coming at you," I yelled into the microphone.

"See 'em," Steve5 yelled back. He grabbed a shoulder fired rocket launcher and aimed at the gunship.

The helicopters were close now, flying low, the growl of their jet engines deafening. They blasted their machine guns, spraying armor piercing bullets into the buildings and desert. The bullets thudded all around, kicking up

gravel and dirt, tearing through the concrete walls.

I saw Steve's rocket shoot up to the lead gunship, hitting it squarely. There's a huge roar from the explosion overhead, the noise and heat from the blast registering on my monitors. The chopper dropped like a rock, crashing to the desert in a tangled mess of metal and fire. The second one thundered by, turning for a second strafing run.

I called for air support, but it'll take our jets a few minutes to reach the squad's position. I prayed they'd all make it out alive.

That night I was in the mess hall in the Safe Zone, having dinner. It was a very bad day. Two of my squad were killed, Steve3 and Steve7.

My platoon leader, Lieutenant Harris, came over and sat down across from me. "Sorry for your loss, Steve," he said. "Were these your first?"

"Yes sir, they were."

He nodded, a concerned look on his face. "I know they were clones, but believe me, I know how you feel. They're still a part of you, they're still you."

Harris got up. "Don't forget to report to the C-Center tomorrow morning. We need to be fully staffed as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir," I said.

I looked at my left hand, at the missing finger. The doctors used it to make my first ten clones; unlike for animal cloning, human cloning required larger pieces than single cells. I wondered what part of me they'll use next.

I looked around the mess hall, at some of the veteran soldiers, the ones who've done three and four tours over here. They're easy to spot. They've had whole hands and even arms amputated.

But it's worth it. It's a small sacrifice to make.





She knew she would never dig deep enough to bury her daddy, that she would continue calling on those who died violently until she had reached her quota and The Undertaker was satisfied.

---

# YOU HAVE TO DIG DEEP TO BURY YOUR DADDY

*Alan Kelly*

---

1

WALKING PAST RECEPTION WAS ALWAYS such a task for Mary. The group of heifers from admin, who engaged in regular routines of pampering, pruning, pigging-out and petulance, would all be gathered around discussing their weekend and would invariably attempt to engage her. Mary looked at the floor and walked by quickly. She had never been the kind of woman easily tempted by novelty and catharsis.

With her neck still red from the noose's kiss, Winnie Ferns, a gangly, flat-faced, dreamy nut of a woman, shouted Mary's name.

"What is it, Winnie?" Mary asked in a quavering, fragile voice.

Winnie dangled a large envelope at Mary like a fisherman teasing a fish. "A note was left at reception for you."

Mary gingerly pinched the edge of the offering with her thumb and index finger as if it might bite her. "Thank you."

Later, Mary sat on a park bench and looked at the envelope. Enclosed within were two curious items. The first was a photo of two children, emaciated and lying face-down with their blond hair matted with dirt. The second was a press-cutting which was about the apparent murder of a teenage boy found in Phoenix Park.

Then Mary noticed a third item: something folded up in a piece of white parchment. She opened it and discovered a Union key with a ragged blue tag containing the letter C and the number 165. A message written on the parchment:

"Failure to adhere to this custom could result in serious consequences" Mary furiously crammed the items into her bag. There had obviously been further developments in the death department. Mary saw that the rain had started.

2

On the way home Mary hummed to herself, trying to shake off her glum mood. She walked a meandering path, not caring that she was sopping wet from the rain. She never carried an umbrella.

Walking up the terrace to her house, Mary turned and saw that a large blue Cadillac was driving her street, toward her. Mary sighed, "Because I could not stop for death, he kindly fucking stops for me." The car stopped, the door opening by itself. "Get in Mary, we have people to see," said the chauffeur, an impertinent skeleton speaking in dulcet tones. Mary got in and closed the door. The car moved sluggishly through the city. Mary looked at the sky, a pale orange canvass with grey freckles. The car stopped. Mary rolled down the window and observed the life rotting away in a towering estate. "The children are upstairs, Mary," the skeleton told her. "Of course," she replied and opened the door. She walked towards the high-rise, blankets of drizzling rain fogging her breath. Mary walked up a spiral staircase and noticed sweet blue flowers struggling past the crude graffiti on the walls. On the first balcony Mary counted the doors, ten in total, no 165. She walked up another flight of stairs, struggling to catch her breath. C was apparently the last balcony. She

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rested on the second flight, looking down at car carcasses and old shopping trolleys. She realized this high-rise hadn't been occupied in a while. She went up to the final floor. 3

Outside 165 Mary held her skinny hand over her mouth to keep from throwing up. The entire balcony was peppered with small animal parts: eight headless pigeons, several cats with their legs removed, two skinned puppies, bleak moments. Mary put the key in the lock and turned the doorknob. The door was stuck so she threw her whole body against it before it opened. The hallway was dark and damp and Mary thought, for want of a better cliché, deathly quiet. She went in, kicking the door shut. Mary once fell for an American gardener. She never noticed the defect but her mother, the quintessential town gossip who always spoke seamlessly, quite often about nothing at all did, and her father, a moody man of dark quiet, ignored him completely. He was aspiring to be an anthropologist and she had been house-sitting for her Aunt Jean when they chanced to pass. He showed up at her Aunt Jean's door with a dazzling bald patch and a spade and she was smitten. They discussed matters horticultural for almost several weeks until her daddy intervened. Her phone rang.

4

"Yes what now?" she asked the caller

"Mary I see it's raining cats and dogs in parts." It was The Undertaker. She rolled her eyes. . . "I know that" she replied witheringly. "Well don't step on a poodle," he laughed. Her thoughts gripped the word 'kill' and betrayed her by quietly latching on to the word 'fee.' "Idiot!" she hung up. Something brushed her leg and she screeched like Janet Leigh. Looking into the dark, she saw something scurry into the sitting room. She went in pursuit. When she was inside, the children sat on the floor by a gas heater. They looked up at her and she smiled, a smile trying to be *delicate*. The stench tasted terrible. "Who are you?" they asked together. "I am the death collector and you're my assignment for today," She told them. "What do you mean by that?" they asked.

5

"Don't be asking such questions. You must take me as I am." She was not one to digress. They looked at each other smiling and said "But what do you mean?" She was getting annoyed and nauseated and needed a sherry. "I don't know," she said, and she didn't. Holding out her hands, she told them again, "We have to go." They jumped up and she saw how hideously bony they were, like the baby from *Faust* had grown up and discovered it had a twin. "We have to bring Sigourney Weaver," and she realised that it must've been some mongrel that had run under her feet earlier. "Where is Sigourney?" she asked and they pointed at the ceiling above her head. *Oh, they hadn't done something awful to another small animal*, she wondered, but when she turned to look she let out a small scream like Kate Jackson and she knew why there had been so many dismembered animals out front. The things dead children will do in their spare time. A spider (was it?) about the size of a small boar was balanced on top of the door, made up from the remains of dead animals. Eight pigeon heads looked her over (guggle,

guggle), the legs a composite of cat dog and other creatures. She thought she'd lose her stomach on the floor but she found there was something really quite tender about it.

6

"How, may I ask are we supposed to get this to the car?" Mary asked, pointing at Sigourney Weaver. The Dead Children grinned. The children used a discarded shopping trolley and a filthy curtain Mary had torn from the window to carry and cover Sigourney. They pushed it across the soggy grass and Mary looked about to see if any curtains twitched in the other high-rises. *The place was empty*, she thought. It reminded her of some forgotten graveyard; if you stood still enough you would probably feel the restless presence of past generations, wriggling away like worms in the dirt. It unnerved her. She opened the boot of the Cadillac. "Help please," she said to the dead children gripping one side of the trolley, the children grabbing the other. "Now, one, two, three, TURN!" They tilted the trolley, Sigourney sliding into the boot. She slammed it shut and threw the children into the backseat. "Now where?" she asked the driver. They drove back through the city. Mary thought she could see a partially skinned man wrapped in Christmas lights, hanging upside down from the GPO. She read that morning in one of the tabloids that a man had been murdered and obscenely mutilated by two teenagers he'd taken in, and then wrapped up in Christmas decorations and fairy lights. She was tired, mind playing tricks on her. The Cadillac turned left onto Parnell Street, driving towards Capal Street and swerved right into Little Britain street. "Where are we going?" she asked, adjusting her scarf. On an apartment balcony a blonde woman danced, her garb leaving little to the imagination, her intestines swinging from above like a meaty bastardisation of a Rapunzel rendition.

7

*Cheap*, thought Mary. The blonde sucked on her finger and waved at the Cadillac. "Another?" observed The Skeleton. Irritated, Mary opened her purse and looked for the envelope. She reached in and found a card with a honeyed scrawl.

**Kiffany Boston-Gifford**  
**Babi Sioux PR**  
**Email: BeKiffed@gmail.com**

"One I overlooked," sighed Mary. "Obviously." Mary waved up at Kiffany Boston-Gifford. Kiffany smiled and replied "I'll throw down the keys, sweet," disappearing off the balcony and returning moments later. Mary made her way up to the apartment on the second floor. When she went inside, Kiffany was applying make-up. "Have you seen this episode, sweet?" Kiffany asked. *A wonderful womanly symphony if ever there was one*, thought Mary, even if her entrails were on the floor. Startled by Kiffany's question, Mary asked peevishly "What episode?" "Doesn't anyone watch this show anymore?" Mary's eyes followed Kiffany's to the flat screen television on the wall. A rerun of *Dynasty* was playing – Alexis Carrington and that haggard blonde at loggerheads. "No," retorted Mary matter-of-factly. "I only

watch a small amount of television.” Kiffany threw her large intestine over her shoulder and declared, “Out is the new in, don’t you think?” “Speaking of which, let’s go,” Mary said to her. “Just a sec, sweet. I need to get my Louis Vuitton.”

Back in the Cadillac, Mary switched the radio on. “Play some Carly Simon, sweet,” demanded Tiffany. Mary ignored her. A holistic healer was telling a mildly interested interviewer that he assisted at an exorcism somewhere in Eastern Europe. Mary chuckled. The interviewee said that the exorcist told him that he had to be ‘slain in spirit’ and subsequently he had suffered convulsions. . Mary smiled at this, that the cast-outs had taken up residence in him. “Prize fool, everyone knows lowlife spirits only make home in the bodies of celebrities.” Mary laughed so loudly that the dead children poked their heads into the front of the car. The Cadillac stopped at Phoenix Park. “Another?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

Mary got out of the Cadillac, the sky crawling strings of muddy colours. She walked over the green, through some fields into the belly of the park, until she came to a public toilet with a red wrought-iron gate. She tried opening it. “Locked.” She shook it but it wouldn’t budge. She walked a little further and came to an empty car park. A teenage Boy was lying still in the centre. She went a little closer and he sat up. “Awake” she asked and he turned to look at her. The thing she noticed first were his dirty eyes, before his throat gave her a gummy smile... “Who the fuck are you?” was the first thing that crawled out of his open wound.

9

“Be quick!” Mary told the boy, looking behind her at the sky. A crescent moon was now sleeping just above the trees. “I kept saying that I wanted to go home. I kept saying that.” The boy was rambling, crawling about on the slick black asphalt. His eyes blinked frantically and his tobacco stained teeth bit down intermittently on the tip of his tongue between rants. The Guinness Factory smoke tunnels were punching a hole in the clouds above the Liffey River in the near distance. “I told him that my ma wanted me back,” It was getting darker in the park, as dark as dread itself. Mary’s phone rang. “Yes?” she answered her voice no more than a fracture. “Bring the boy, the children, Kiffany and Sigourney Weaver to me.” It was The Undertaker. Agreeing, Mary hung up and that was when the Cadillac’s light arrived. “BE QUICK!” She shouted, taking hold of his arm “I do NOT have time for this boy!” the boy walked quickly to the car. Mary threw herself down in the passenger seat. “Where now Mary?”

“To him, always to him” she whispered.

The Cadillac drove back to the city, past the Obelisk, beyond a belt of dead trees. The children remained quiet in the backseat but Sigourney thrashed about in the boot.

10

Mary turned up the radio and could feel sleep calling her from home. Her small comfortable room of panelled doors and pockets of glorious shadows, her bed, Murial Spark’s Jean Brodie to take to bed with. The city was still, falling rain barely catching the lights of closing shops. The Cadillac stopped. The Mortuary looked like a sad broken shed. Mary sat in the car and watched a while. She switched

off the radio, gave the skeleton a half smile and got out of the car.

Above the mortuary The Undertaker’s receptionist, Lyna Trash, hovered twelve feet deep in the dark air. The dead kids, the boy and Kiffany stayed behind Mary.

“He is waiting Mary and he is NOT happy!” she hollered down, her short red cropped hair effervescent on her head against the sky.

“I’ll see to that for myself Lyna!” Mary hollered back and took the dead down to meet The Undertaker. Looking back over her shoulder she shouted at Lyna, “You can do something with Sigourney Weaver.”

The melange of murder victims where led down to the morgue. “I’m glad you adhered, Mary. ” The crippling hum of The Undertaker’s rasp slithered out of the dark, a still but thrashing darkness.

“Here are the children and others. Lyna is taking care of Sigourney.” Mary scratched her arm. The Undertaker smiled and stared at her for what seemed like centuries before he said anything.

11

“I see. This,” he said as he pointed at the dead folk, “is not nearly enough.” Mary just looked at him and mumbled, “I’m tired.”

“You have an obligation, Mary. An obligation to do as I say. You Have to Dig Deep to Bury your Daddy!” he screamed. “ Remember, adhere to my custom or the only other option is... well I think you know what that is,” and she did know, only too well. “Go now,” he finished, “Go on.” Before leaving the mortuary she looked back at the day’s dead. The Undertaker was placing them in their coffins. Her eyes became glass and she hurried out.

Mary had burned her father alive and was delivered to this limbo. Burned her daddy and she would never eschew this fate. Those who kill are condemned to collect other victims. She knew she would never dig deep enough to bury her daddy, that she would continue calling on those who died violently until she had reached her quota and The Undertaker was satisfied. But a part far deep down in her own soul knew that would never happen.

Mary sat up in bed with Jean Brodie but couldn’t concentrate, so she put on her dressing gown and went into her small kitchen. She made herself a cup of tea, using two bags instead of one and added a capful of sherry. She sipped it, but when she turned to sit at her kitchen table she was confronted with a whisper of a girl. A whisper of a girl violently shaking her head.

12

The pale whisper looked at Mary “In New York, one never notices the rain.”

“Another bloody one,” Mary spat. Mary took two strides across the kitchen to stop the girl shaking, but when Mary’s arm met the girl’s arm she dissolved into sand.

“What” Mary shouted at herself before noticing a hospital tag on her kitchen floor. She squatted down, picked it up and read it carefully.

It read Mandy Moon.



SOMETHING WAS STANDING JUST BEHIND A SHEET  
FOR I SAW THE LOWER LEGS OF SOMETHING  
MANLIKE, YET OBVIOUSLY *NOT OF HUMAN FORM*.

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# MESSAGE FROM A BOTTLE

## Paul Piot

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UNDER A RED-HOT SUN, THE LONE OCCUPANT of a bright yellow dinghy rowed steadily over the still surface of a vast body of water. When the raft passed over a floating object, the young female rower took notice. Bobbing beside her in the water was a corked glass bottle. The shapely oarswoman grabbed the curious artifact before it drifted away. Upon further examination, she found it contained a piece of parchment. Pulling the cork out with her teeth, she shook the contents to her hand and gently uncoiled the brittle pages with finely manicured fingers. . .

Master Leopold III:

So it came to be that I, William Rouble your most humble and loyal servant, having returned to the lands of my forefathers to collect my inheritance, realized too late the devilry that once was contained in the very high reaches has now seeped to the very periphery of the shoreline. It was not until my companions and I reached the high central plains that we took notice of the stirrings and peculiarities enveloping us.

Two were taken the first night while we slept, leaving only Gregory and myself. We found no trace of the others, no sign of struggle, and so moved off quickly before whatever fell upon them returned for us. We tried our best to reach the walls of my father's fortress before nightfall but alas, my aged legs, even with Gregory's aid, failed to muster enough strength to do so.

The sky darkened and clouds crept in delivering a

starless, moonless evening. Not wanting to spend another night in the open, we continued as best we could to safety, or what I had hoped was a safe haven. It grew cold, slowing our movements, and the darkness seemed to press against my very eyes like a heavy palm, damp and strong. At some point Gregory screamed out. I could not find him immediately and did not search long as we had previously agreed not to do so, but it wore heavily on me. I shall not forgive myself.

My weary legs took me as fast as they could in the insufferable dark until quite suddenly a lone light bore a path to my eyes. Unfortunate for Gregory, I realized then how close we were, only minutes from the fortress.

I searched for signs of life within the solid walls of my father's abode after stumbling across an old torch, which took my second last match to light. The dark poured in around the flickering torchlight preventing its glow from reaching the nooks and corners of the stone corridors as if some unholy magic pushed back. I should have been safe there!

Luckily, my memory was intact for I found the remembrance of details from my early childhood invaluable. I searched the rooms quickly knowing the torch would dictate the time I could spend looking. I found no sign of life among the many rooms on the first two floors. When I reached the upper floors my sanity was tested to the very brink of human reason.

In one of the rooms, I found several buckets and a large



metal barrel. The odor of boiled meat wafted out at me through the open door. My curiosity bested, I approached the large barrel and looked over the rim seeing only a dark liquid and whiffed the scent of hot honey. I was tempted to taste, not having eaten since breakfast, and so gave it a stir with a finger. Though it gave no sign, the liquid was extremely hot. I cried out wiping the liquid on my clothes—a mistake I would later regret most grievously. The disturbance my finger caused churned the liquid and what appeared were like noodles in a thick broth. Beside me, floating in one of the small, liquid filled buckets I suddenly noticed a severed hand. In another bucket was a decomposed foot and a third contained a man's genitalia. I ran from the room, my stomach ready to heave, and stumbled into another room that I realized had long ago been my bedroom.

Here, I beheld a terrible sight causing me to shudder. Bed sheets dripping with blood hung from a clothesline running through the middle of the room. Something was standing just behind a sheet for I saw the lower legs of something manlike, yet obviously *not of human form*. I closed the door quickly for I heard the thing sniffing and snorting at my presence and I could ill afford to let it catch wind of me.

In my brother's old room I found what must have been a corpse lying on the floor tightly wrapped in fetid, gray cloth. It looked as a Mummy and its stench almost overwhelmed my senses, like the rankness of sweaty stockings mixed with rotted meat. I felt a burbling in the pit of my stomach, yet managed to flee the room before the vomit reached my throat. I shut the door firmly and gathered my breath. 'Twas then I stumbled upon the most terrifying and frightening sight I have ever witnessed.

Upon passing an open door, I observed on the bed a woman, pale and limp, who looked to have been dead for quite some time. I did not recognize her. There were two "beings" in the room tending to the body. At the foot of the bed stood a winged headless beast, some vile cross between bear and bat, with long shaggy arms shoved between the dead woman's thighs. Another creature, small with wrinkled skin and a tiny tuft of red hair, bounced on the bed near the woman's head. Suddenly the large bear-bat creature spread the woman's legs until the hip joints popped with an unsettling crunch. The little wrinkled creature leaped on the woman's stomach. Both beasts screeched as the woman's dead body birthed a wriggling bloody mass. The new arrival was not of this world! When it cried out, I was utterly revolted and fled with my sobriety loosely coherent.

I did not regain full control of my mental faculty until dawn, where I found myself stumbling through a dried riverbed that led back to the sea. The remnants of our wood raft I could see scattered along the beach, torn to pieces. I could see our ship still anchored beyond the reef, out of easy reach. It was apparent I had to swim the distance. I did not think my body was up to the challenge, if the distance did not claim my life the pounding surf surely would. Still, I had to attempt to get away before nightfall when the insidious beasts and other disturbing island creatures would creep from hiding.

With deep reluctance, I stepped into the reedy water, wading in up to my waist. The current was only gently pushing against me as I was still within the confines of the reef. Prepared for a long swim, about to plunge forward, I spotted something like a box jellyfish hovering in the

water a few meters ahead. I watched only a moment before realizing that IT was *watching me*. Thick strands of hair-like appendages floated in the water around the blob and two pale blue eyes bored straight at me. Whitish in color with blue vein-like squiggles, the glob of jelly remained elusive and slowly sunk under the surface.

Fear instilled me to make for the shore, but my legs being submerged did not seem able to move fast enough. I sensed the thing drawing closer. When I reached knee-deep water, I felt a stabbing pain. Something took a bite at my Achilles tendon, nibbling like a fish with bait. Another strike and I felt the tendon sever and barely managing to throw myself onto the sand before collapsing. I clawed my way up the beach to the tree line. A trail of blood seeped into the sand and sea while I quickly tied a tourniquet around my leg just below the calf. There was no sign of the beast in the water and no indication there were any more of them, but suffice to say I was quite reluctant to wander near the surf.

It was late afternoon when I finally succumbed to the realization that I would never get off the island. My clothing, where I wiped my hand of the burning liquid earlier, is turning to dust and I fear the coming cold night. I can fend off my attackers for a while, but the new wound I fear will be the end of me.

Master, I know we separated on less than hospitable grounds but I am in desperate need of help. I can only offer what I stand to inherit on this dreadful island as payment as you know I am a poor man. If by some remarkable happenstance I am alive when you arrive then we will split the entire estate. If not, all is yours and this record will act as my will. I also realize sending this message by bottle in all probability will never find you, or anyone for that matter. I doubt it shall even escape the reef.

Faint hope is all I have left.

Night creeps in.

My last match is wet and cannot strike.

I await the coming darkness with dreadful trepidation for I can hear the isle's occupants rousing and sense a menacing shadow circling somewhere in the swirling mists overhead.

Your ever-modest servant, William Rouble.

The aged parchment slipped from the woman's trembling grasp and blew out across the water. The ancient pages melted on contact. The woman in the dinghy looked up over rolling waves to her distant yacht listing notably to one side. Then, glancing over her shoulder in the direction she was rowing, her pretty face paled.

The isle, her apparent salvation, was very near. Its lush welcoming shores suddenly did not seem so inviting . . .

And the bobbing mass stretched translucent tentacles out across the water.



He walked over to a workbench. It was worn and stained with a number of colors, mostly crimson. He found a woman's fingernail near a vice grip attached to the table.

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# ANOTHER MAN'S WIFE

## David Bernstein

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GARRETT MULNEY HAD BEEN MAKING love to Beth Wilcox when her husband came home. The sound of tires scrunching across the pebbled driveway alerted the lovers. The two paused, still in oneness, listening. The room, moments ago alive with moans and whispered profanities, now suspended in quiet like an old forgotten graveyard. Garrett jumped up as if Beth's body had become a rotten corpse.

"It's probably a delivery truck, silly," Beth said.

Garrett peered out of one of the bedroom's windows. It was a blue pickup, shiny with large tires.

"It's Harold," Garrett said, his glistening penis losing its stiffness as he stood naked.

"What?" Beth yelled. "He never comes home early." She grabbed her lover's clothes and threw them at him. Garrett caught the pants; the rest falling at his feet. "Get dressed and go out one of the windows." The garage roof was a few feet down and would make for a safe and quick exit.

Garrett and Beth got dressed in hurried fashion. Beth made the bed while Garrett attempted to open a window.

"Won't budge," he said, tugging hard, veins showing in his neck.

"Go out another then."

Garrett tried the other two windows, but the result was the same. Frustrated, he punched the wall. A small framed picture of Beth and Harold skiing somewhere in Vermont fell from its hanging place. The glass cracked, sending a line across the face of husband and wife, but the frame held.

"Sorry," Garrett said. He bent to pick it up.

"Leave it," Beth yelled. "Get out of here."

"Where?"

"Go out the bathroom window down the hall," Beth said, fluffing Harold's pillow.

Garrett sped down the hall. Harold hadn't come inside the house yet as far he could guess. He tried the bathroom window, it was locked too. "Damn it," he mumbled. "What's with this place?"

Beth was at the end of the hall, standing atop the staircase. Garrett waited, watching for a signal. She yelled a whisper, "He's at the front door," her hands fluttering at her sides like a butterfly's wings.

Garrett came out of the bathroom, "Window won't open in there either."

"Hide in the closet," Beth said. She ran to the door next to her bedroom and opened it. Garrett hurried over, unsure about Beth's plan, his widening eyes indicating his displeasure. Beth shot him a desperate glance, her face, pale like she was about to vomit and ushered him in. "Wait here and be quiet." She shut the door.

The closet was roomy, a walk-in. A small amount of sunlight came in from under the door, not enough to make anything out except for a couple pair of men's boots off to the side. Garrett waited nervously as sweat began building in the crux of his back and under his armpits. He held his breath as he heard Beth's voice approaching. She was talking to Harold, nonstop, as if to keep him busy. Garrett squirmed a few inches away from the door as Beth and Harold's shadows blotted out the sunlight that shown across

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his sneakers.

Garrett Mulney had been delivering groceries to the people of Mayfair for three years. He was a good looking twenty six year old. He'd met Beth six months ago while she was shopping in the local grocery store, G-Mart. They flirted, she was in her early forties, but Garrett found her extremely sexy. The flirting eventually led to an ongoing affair. Every Tuesday and Thursday Garrett would deliver Beth's groceries, and her orgasms. Monday, Wednesday and Friday were reserved for the other women on his routes, each believing they were the only one he serviced. Beth got him for two days, making her his favorite. He became known as the Milk Man, a nickname given to him by the G-Mart's owner, an 85 year old man who delivered milk during the 1950's.

The closet door sprang open, startling Garrett. Beth stood before him, panicked. She held out her hand. It was cold and clammy like the body of a slug.

"C'mon," she said. "He's in the bedroom changing."

Garrett, still clenching Beth's hand, flew down the stairs. The two adulterers moving like two practiced ballerinas, quiet and graceful.

Beth tried the front door, it was locked. "Try the back. Go, go, go," she said, shoving Garrett away.

Garrett took off, running through the living room, arriving seconds later in the kitchen. Garrett hesitated, afraid to fail again. He walked to the backdoor, took a deep breath and grabbed the doorknob. He turned the knob, but it too, like all the other windows and doors, wouldn't open. He felt more defeated than frustrated, like a beaten fighter after a long bout.

"Well?" Beth whispered harshly from around the corner.

"No, it won't open. What's with your house?"

Beth came sliding around the corner, her socks acting as if the polished wood floor were made of ice. "Harold's got to fix this dump."

Garrett lived in a small two bedroom apartment with his wife. They both had low paying jobs and struggled to pay the bills. Beth was being a bitch for complaining about her large house, which by most people's standards was above normal. She had three bathrooms, a three car garage, an in-ground swimming pool and a hot tub on the first floor porch.

"Get in the cellar," she said before sliding across the ceramic tiles to the cellar door.

"I'm not hiding in there." Garrett crossed his arms, refusing to move.

"If he finds you, he'll kill you."

Harold was a six foot four inch mass of a man. He always wore work-boots and blue jeans. The few times he'd come into the G-Mart, he was quiet and mild mannered. To Garrett, he resembled a grizzly bear on tranquilizers. Nonetheless, the man was intimidating in his appearance.

"Get in there, now," Beth demanded, bouncing up and down like a spoiled child.

"Honey," Harold's voice boomed from around the corner like a distant clap of thunder from an approaching storm.

Beth's eyes lit up as if a hundred watt bulb were behind them. Garrett absorbed her fear and jumped through the doorway, Beth quietly shutting the door behind him.

Garrett paused on the first step down as he heard muffled, but audible words.

"Did you get a new cell phone, babe?"

"No, why?"

"I found this on the night stand." An object, small and plastic sounding, smacked against the kitchen table, before sliding across it.

"I found it earlier in the parking lot of the grocery. Thought I'd take it home and see if I recognized any of the numbers. Maybe call them and let them know I had their phone."

Garrett nearly tumbled backwards, catching himself on the handrail. He quickly checked his pockets. His phone was gone. In the rush to leave he had forgotten to take it.

"Well, did you?" Harold asked.

"Yeah, no one I know." Silence followed for a few seconds before Beth spoke again. "Let's go out for a bite since you're home early."

"Not in the mood."

"We hardly ever go out, please?"

"I got work to do in the cellar. I can't."

Garrett spun around. The stairs were dimly lit from a what looked like sunlight. He had to get down the stairs and hide. His first step was fine, but the second one creaked loudly, as if he'd hurt it. Garrett cursed to himself. He remained motionless, letting out a slow breath. He'd have to wait and avoid any further noise. Beth would think of something, but before Garrett could take another breath the doorknob behind him began to squeak.

He spun around on his toes, making sure to leave the pressure on them. The door was slowly opening, leading to his impending end. He held tight to the banister, not sure what else to do, like cornered prey. A section of the kitchen came into view, followed by the back of Harold's checkered flannel.

"I'm tired of this," Beth yelled. "You're always busy with something. Can't we just spend the day together?"

Garrett braced himself, getting ready to shoot up the stairs and try to make it past the big fellow. He had to get caught sooner or later, weren't all cheaters? His wife would be pissed. Maybe even leave him. Garrett was about to make a move when he heard the familiar ring of his cell phone.

Harold let go of the doorknob causing it to swing open further. Garrett could now see Harold's entire back. Beth was standing a few feet across from him. Her eyes bulged with terror, like a swimmer seeing a shark's fin approaching. She met Garrett's stare.

Garrett tried to reach the door, but was too far away. The creaky step kept him from moving. There was nothing he could do.

"Aren't you going to answer it?" Harold asked.

Beth proved immobile, her eyes off of Garrett. The phone chimed again. "What for?" she managed.

"To see if maybe it's the owner or someone who knows the owner?" Harold rubbed his head, like a huge gorilla at the zoo.

Beth looked at the phone. She seemed frazzled and unsure of what to do. Garrett, silently, was mouthing for her to pick it up, but he realized it was a bad idea. Drawing Beth's attention might bring Harold's as well. Eyes followed eyes, it was human nature.

"I'll answer it then," Harold said sounding annoyed and before Beth could grab the phone, Harold had it. "Hello?"

Beth shot Garrett a quick glance. She was shaking like a junky needing a fix. Garrett waved her off.

"Ah, no miss. This is Harold Wilcox. My wife found this

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phone in the parking lot of the grocery, up in Mayfair.

Garrett felt nauseous. A small amount of bile upchucked into the back of his throat. He quickly swallowed it.

"Garrett Mulney," Harold said. Beth, who was inching her way towards the cellar door, looked up at her husband.

"I'm afraid I'm not heading back into town today, but maybe I could drop it off at your place if you're nearby?"

Garrett's mouth had a cottony feel to it, and his throat was on the verge of a tickle. He tried gathering saliva to moisten his pallet, but none could be gathered. Nervous about having to cough Garrett wiped the sweat from his forehead and arms, transferring it via his fingers to his mouth. The sweat was salty, but the tickle in his throat was gone.

"Hmm, that's the other side of town," Harold said.

A few moments of silence followed. Harold was nodding his head, as if in some agreement with Garrett's wife. Beth had stopped moving, she was within a legs length of the cellar door. Any further and she might cause Harold to turn, bringing Garrett into his view.

"That's an idea, sure. We're at 755 Lancaster Lane, be here all day." Harold was smiling and polite. Garrett felt a tiny amount of sadness for him, but it was ultimately his fault his wife was cheating. He thought about his own wife. He wasn't proud for cheating on her, but he was a man and they, by nature, were cheaters. Each woman was different. Some liked it rough, some wanted to role play, while others just wanted a good bang. He loved his wife very much, but a man was a man.

Garrett watched as Beth's demeanor changed. She stopped shaking and crossed her arms. Garrett heard a tapping, her foot was the cause.

"You're welcome," Harold said happily, "but hey, if you want to thank someone, thank my wife, Beth, she's the one responsible for all this."

"Unbelievable," Beth said angrily.

"Okay, see you then," Harold said before hanging up. He gently placed the cell on the kitchen table. He looked at Beth. "What?"

Beth pointed towards the cell phone and when Harold's glare was off her, she kicked the cellar door closed.

Garrett watched as Beth, Harold and the kitchen vanished. The force at which the door slammed almost knocked him back. What was Beth doing?

"You son of a bitch," he heard Beth yell. "You told that lady to come here so we wouldn't be able to go out, didn't you?"

Garrett smiled. Beth was quite the actress.

"No, sweetie. I don't feel like heading out today. Besides, the guy probably needs his phone."

"Bullshit. You're an asshole. When is she coming?"

"Around two or so. Come on, babe. Let's do your thing; hang out in bed and watch movies all day and night."

"Fine," Beth answered. "But that means you're all mine. No cellar. I'm sick and tired of you disappearing down there."

"For you, anything."

Garrett heard them leave. It sounded like they went into the living room, but he couldn't know for certain. He'd have to wait until Beth got free and could signal him. At least he could rest easy knowing Harold was off limits to the cellar.

Garrett walked gingerly down the steps, each one a potential landmine. He felt safer knowing the basement

was off limits to Harold, but he still had to be careful. He reached the bottom, his breathing normal again.

The cellar was damp and the air stale, like a swamp at dusk. Garrett glanced around. The cellar was smaller than he'd imagined, only running half the length of the house. Four support beams, telephone pole width, stood like tired old relics. Large, rusted tow truck sized chains hung from nails on each beam, burdening them further.

The floor was half plank board, half compacted dirt. Steel shelves lined three of the walls, each filled with various sized cardboard boxes, faded coffee and paint cans, and a number of plastic storage units, probably used for sorting small screws and nuts.

Shovels, rakes, hoes, sickles, and other home improvement tools hung from the wall adjacent to the staircase. Harold was an apparent do-it-yourselfer.

A cement staircase led to a pair of storm doors, another possible way out if things got hairy. Garrett walked over and inspected them. The stairway was clean, like it was swept regularly. The storm doors seemed solid, made of high gauge steel, but what Garrett found pleasing was the locking feature. Storm doors locked from the inside using a simple latch. He'd wait for Beth before trying them; the heavy steel might make for too much noise and alert Harold.

Above all, the rest of cellar was dusty. Garrett's intrusion stirred the room. Dust particles could be seen fluttering in the sun's rays like thousands of tiny creatures taking flight. The cellar had one small window. It looked rusted in place as if it hadn't been opened since the house's construction. The number of cobwebs covering it only added to Garrett's speculation that the window wasn't used. He was easily spooked by the cobwebs, but it was the spiders he really feared. Garrett had developed a minor case of arachnophobia at the age of ten when a spider's egg hatched near his bed, sending thousands of baby spiders crawling over his skin while he slept, until waking. It was something he was never quite able to forget.

Garrett surveyed the cellar again. Two of the corners had spiders in them, sitting on webs. They were of a decent size, but it was the one's he didn't see, the one's hiding that he was concerned about.

He walked over to a workbench. It was worn and stained with a number of colors, mostly crimson. He found a woman's fingernail near a vice grip attached to the table. The big oaf had his wife help him with his chores. It was no wonder she looked elsewhere for sex. He left the fingernail alone, jumped up onto the table and waited.

Garrett glanced at his watch for the third time since entering the cellar. It was 3 p.m. and still no sign, not even a hint of Beth. His wife had probably picked up his phone already, now wondering where he was. Staying put was no longer an option, he had to get out. He'd be quiet and as soon as he was outside, he'd run straight into the woods behind the house, before working his way to his car. He'd left it on Baker Street, three blocks away.

Garrett sat back down on the workbench, calming himself with slow deep breaths. He tried ignoring his watch, but found himself poking a look at it every so often. He never imagined he'd have to wait so long. He was thirsty; his stomach, warm from lack of food. Time seemed to be slowing down and with nothing to keep him occupied, it would remain so. Garrett's watch read 4 p.m.

"That's it," he said softly, lunging himself off the table



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and walking over to the storm doors. Quietly, Garrett moved the L-shaped pin, the mechanism that held the doors from opening, and pushed upwards. The heavy doors held. Garrett tried again, exerting himself, using all his strength. A crack of sunlight came through, but something was keeping the doors from opening, a lock no doubt. Harold was some kind of security freak. Garrett turned around, and not but an inch from his face was a large hairy spider hanging from a web. He skidded backwards, banging his head into the cellar doors and giving himself a huge headache. He watched as the eight legged creature went back up its web. Garrett crouched, straining his neck to keep an eye on the spider as he went under it and waddled his way over to the workbench.

Garrett sat cross-legged atop the table, tucking his legs and feet in close to his body and every so often craning his neck, looking upwards, making sure no more creepy crawlers were descending upon him. He began to come up with excuses for his whereabouts, first his wife. It would require some damage to his car, but with the bump on his head, it would work. He'd hit a tree, head-on; say he'd swerved avoiding a deer. The bump was on the back of his head, but he'd say it wasn't the accident that knocked him out, it was the fall he took getting out of his car. He'd say he woke up in the grass, got back in his car and drove home, perfect.

Garrett had tried staying awake, slapping himself, thinking of spiders, but hunger and weariness overtook him. He managed to lay down in a fetal position where he eventually nodded off.

Garrett awoke, sitting up immediately, disoriented. The lump on his head reminded him where he was. He could barely see across the room. The sun had all but vanished. Where the hell was Beth? She must not have been able to get away, maybe even fell asleep. Garrett pressed the illumination button on his watch. The soft light was almost blinding, he squinted. It was 7 p.m., Beth must be up. It was time to leave.

Garrett climbed off the table, took a step forward, jumping back quickly and bashing his hip into the workbench. The pain was hard, like he'd been hit by a hammer. A web had touched his nose and Garrett was hysterically brushing himself off, wiping his face, running his fingers through his hair and checking his chest area. Any webs that may have been on him were off, along with any spider that made it, but the sticky sensation, like an invisible string, was still with him. He told himself it was only a phantom feeling, nothing was there. Garrett crawled back onto the table, deciding to wait, where it was safe. His right hip throbbed, but it was nothing to fuss over.

The cellar was quiet, the air musty and his vacant stomach growled as it churned in its own acids. Two more hours had passed when Garrett looked at his watch again. He found it harder and harder to stay sane. 9 p.m. was the limit, he couldn't take it anymore. His wife would now have the police involved, and even though he wasn't missing for 24 hours, they'd at least keep a look out for his car. For all he knew, his wife had seen it down the street if she'd gone that way. She'd surely contacted his work numerous times, making them worried too.

He'd come back late from deliveries before and had been reprimanded for it. It was the customers, his loyalists, whom he'd shopped religiously every week, and demanded no one else

deliver groceries. Garrett always delivered everything as requested, and with the new Super Center going in a few miles from town, G-Mart needed to please its customers. Garrett needn't worry about his job so much as his wife. He needed to get out, call the police, see if his wife was looking for him, give him a feel if his plan could work.

Garrett decided he'd go up the cellar stairs and listen for any evidence of people. From there, he'd assess his situation and make a move. Using the light from his watch he walked cautiously across the room, stopping only when he bumped into another string. This time it was heavier and didn't have that sticky feeling to it. A pull-string dangled from a light fixture, bulb included. The temptation to pull was overwhelming, as if his life depended on it. He began to have a tug of war with himself. A quick pull and his darkness problem would vanish. The fear of someone, Harold, seeing the light was too great. Maybe he could tug the string, look around and absorb his surroundings, check for webs in his path. He would only need a few seconds. No, he couldn't. Any amount of light, especially a flash of light, could attract Harold to his presence. He had no way of knowing where the man was. In the kitchen? Outside? In the bedroom? Taking a crap? If only Garrett had looked around more, earlier, when the sun was still shining, maybe one of the boxes had a flashlight in it. He wasn't about to go prodding amongst them now, his watch's light would have to do. Garrett proceeded toward the stairs.

He climbed each step slowly, using the foundation as a guide. The rickety steps hardly concerned him. Thirst and hunger had jumped to his highest priority. It almost seemed like getting caught was a secondary, maybe even a thirdly concern. He kept his composure, allowing his mind to control his actions, not his emotions.

The same blackness engulfing the basement, filled the top of the staircase, the kitchen lights were off. He'd hoped for a sliver of light, a glow from beneath the door, something he could use for hope. He kept on nonetheless.

At the top step, he bent low, putting his ear by the bottom of the door. A cool breeze, fresh air, flowed across his face, revitalizing him. Silence, however, filled his ears.

Garrett reached up, found the doorknob, turned it and pushed. He closed his eyes. "Please, please, just open," he whispered and tried again. The door was locked. Garrett's hand fell hard to the step. Defeated, he wanted to cry.

Composing himself, Garrett stood up, anger overtaking him. It was time for action. The door was thick, but enough bashing would bring it down. Who cares if he's caught, he had to live. Garrett took a step back, put his hands against the walls and brought his leg back. He was about to bash the door down when a roar of thunder erupted from the cellar. Someone was opening the storm doors. Two consecutive screeches, one, a pause, then the other, like two banshees screaming in the night.

Garrett inched his way down a few stairs, crawling on his chest, his feet behind him. He peered around the corner, where the sheetrock wall ended. Intense light poured in from the outside through the open storm doors. Garrett lay protected in shadow.

Harold came down the storm door steps, a huge black bag, plastic in appearance, slung over his right shoulder. Garrett could hear a car's engine running. The light must be from a vehicle's headlights.

Harold walked to where the string for the light was, and

clicked it on. The bulb did its job, engulfing the entire room, like a tiny sun. Garrett squinted against the blinding light as Harold strode over to one of the shelves, grabbed a piece of the support and pulled. The entire shelf came away from the wall, opening like a door. The items on the shelf hadn't moved an inch, as if they'd been glued in place. A shiny metallic door with a key pad attached, stood where the shelf had been. A small red LED emanated above the pad, indicating it was locked.

Garrett watched, frozen in place, like a tongue to a flagpole on a frosty winter eve. Harold punched a sequence of numbers. Garrett couldn't quite make them out, but noticed a pattern, the number 7. The red LED became green, followed by a sharp beep, like a microwave's at the end of its countdown. Harold went in, leaving the door slightly ajar. He came out a few minutes later, bag free, shut both hidden doors before clicking the light off and left the way he came. The light from outside disappeared as Harold drove off.

Garrett came down the stairs, the cellar as dark as ever, like the inside of a bat's wing at midnight. Using the light from his watch, Garrett found his way over to the shelf-door. The metal was warm where Harold had touched it. Garrett tried pulling, but the shelf remained where it was. He tried again, still nothing. Frustrated, he felt around until he came across a button. It was on the inside of the shelf-door's handle. Garrett pressed the button with his forefinger and pulled. The shelf came away from the wall, exposing the menacing red LED light. He tried the key pad, using the pattern he'd noticed, 4, 1, 2, 3, 6, 9. The door beeped and the red LED was replaced by a friendlier green one. The heavy, vault-like door popped open, like an airtight refrigerator releasing its suction. Garrett went in.

The place was spotless, air-conditioned, and resembled a sterile operating room. The room was lit by overhead track lighting. A large, stainless steel operating table, complete with straps at the top and bottom, stood in the center of the room. Large halogen lights floated above it.

A long counter ran along the back wall, above it were cabinets. Bone saws, rib spreaders, hacksaws, ice-picks, hammers of various shapes and sizes, a sickle, a number of scalpels, and other surgical and not so surgical implements lined the counter, and all new in appearance as if the owner polished them regularly.

Garrett walked over to one of the cabinets and opened it. The room seemed to spin as his stomach cramped up, getting ready to vomit. Jars and cube shaped containers, each one filled with separate items, surrounded by a golden fluid, filled his vision. Some had eyeballs, others teeth and ears. One box had what appeared to be scrotums, another penises, the one next to it, vaginas. Others had toes and fingers.

Garrett closed the cabinet and backed away. He looked around for the black bag Harold had carried in. It was in a corner, folded neatly, each side seemingly even in length, next to a large freezer-like storage container.

Garrett walked over to the container. It reminded him of the ice-cream cooler at work. He opened it.

Frigid air chilled his lungs making him cough. He had to back away, as if excusing himself, before returning. Garrett waved away the frothy air, revealing a woman's foot, the toenails painted candy apple red. He pulled his hand away and watched as the rest of the figure came into view.

The body was naked, except for the head which had a ski-mask over it; canary blonde hair shown from beneath it. Garrett was relieved it wasn't Beth. For a minute he'd thought maybe Harold had suspected she was cheating and killed her. Looking closer, he noticed a tattoo below the navel, causing him to lose his breath. The number 8 with a rose entwined within it.

"It can't be," Garrett gasped, quickly yanking off the mask. He trembled, staring into his dead wife's lifeless eyes. They stared accusingly back at him. It was Garrett's fault his wife was dead.

"You think I didn't know?" a voice said from behind.

Garrett spun around. Harold stood in the doorway holding Beth's severed head by the hair, a huge hunting knife in the other. The knife's blade was still dripping with blood. Harold tossed the head towards Garrett. It rolled awkwardly like a log with nubs, flopping and bouncing towards Garrett, stopping inches from his feet. Beth's head was reduced to a tangled heap of brunette hair leaving only the raw fleshy neck exposed.

"You can have her," Harold said, before pulling a gun from his pants and shooting Garrett. The gun was quiet, letting out a soft splatting sound. Garrett fell into darkness.

He awoke sometime later, naked and strapped to the cold stainless steel operating table, a gag filling his mouth. Standing above him was Harold, holding a scalpel, dressed in a surgeon's garb, face mask and all.

"Glad you're finally awake."

Garrett tried speaking, but the gag made his words intelligible.

"You're going to scream a lot and I hate that." Harold lowered the scalpel to Garrett's stomach. Garrett tried pleading through his gag. Harold paused, taking the scalpel away. "I can't understand what you're saying, but I suppose you want to know what I'm going to do?" Garrett mumbled something inaudible. "I'm going to remove small pieces of you, skin, bone, organs, building to bigger, more significant parts, and see how long I can keep you alive while doing it." Garrett tried speaking again. Harold shook his head. "My record is ten hours, I'm hoping to improve that with you." Harold lowered the scalpel and began cutting.

Garrett screamed for the next twelve hours.



“I’VE SEEN PEOPLE USE THE TERM SCREAM QUEEN LIKE IT’S A TERRIFIC AND FUN HANDLE AND I HAVE SEEN PEOPLE USE IT IN A SENTENCE LIKE THEY WOULD THE TERM SEX OFFENDER.”

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# DEBBIE ROCHON: THE HARDEST WORKING WOMAN IN HORROR

## Interview by Adam Blomquist

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**W**ITH OVER A HUNDRED AND FIFTY SCREEN ROLES to her credit, not to mention her turns as a writer, producer, radio host and essayist, few people have as impressive a horror pedigree as Debbie Rochon. Dedicated to her craft while being affable and gracious with her fans; Rochon is the complete package. She recently made some time in her busy schedule to talk to us about her career and the industry in general; her anecdotes are sometimes good, sometimes bad, but all horror. You can find out more on her website: [Debbierochon.com](http://Debbierochon.com)

**Macabre Cadaver:** Wow, over a hundred and fifty screen roles since your first small role in *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* in 1981, could you tell readers about your early years in acting?

**Debbie Rochon:** Well my early years in acting were really focused on studying and working with NYC theater companies like The Tribeca Lab, The Actor’s Alliance and Love Creek Theater Company to name a few. I started going out for bit roles in the late 80’s. In 1988 and 1989 I got a few bit roles in films like *Party Inc.*, which starred the late Marilyn Chambers. This was a T&A comedy for the then burgeoning cable channel Cinemax. I also got some horror movie bit parts in flicks like *Lurkers*, *Banned* and *Valerie*. So once I was introduced to the convention scene in 1992 I met a lot of people there and began working and getting bigger roles with experience. I was always somewhat limited in what I landed simply because I never had the desire to move to L.A. I really loved NYC.

**MC:** With such a sizable filmography you must be on film sets for a good part of the year. A lot of actors can’t say this. Is the workload ever too much?

**DR:** That’s only about half true. I am on film sets quite a bit yes, but it’s very rare that I spend more than a few days on any one set. I prefer to spend 4 weeks on a movie but that’s not always the reality of the budget and shooting schedules. So I can go to a location and work for one day or 12 days but rarely will I ever go anywhere for a month or more. But the workload can be daunting! Just making schedules work having to co-produce and co-host the Fangoria Radio show for almost 3 years now that has made travel a little trickier. But as long as you love everything you do then it’s energizing really!

**MC:** You’ve done extensive work with Troma. I know Lloyd Kaufman still insists (through great expense) on shooting his films in 35mm. Do you think the switch to mostly digital photography has hurt or helped the independent horror film?

**DR:** Yes Lloyd loves film as I do. But finally the HD cameras are now compatible with lenses that keep the picture clear but soften the image at the same time. That’s what film looks like projected. It is mostly flattering where as cheap video is unflattering. The new technology is finally catching up in creating imagery that is pleasing to the eye, not just ‘clear’ looking but it’s able to add the mysterious feel that 35 mm film has which is great. I think this technology has blown open the doors of possibility for filmmakers.

It has made it completely affordable in comparison to working with film and film cameras. But don’t misunderstand me: You still need to learn lighting, how to work your camera and composition regardless of what format you’re working on.

I have heard Lloyd say many times that he wants to do







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a story involving a small ensemble cast, shot on HD video for his next project... so maybe he will forfeit 35mm for his next show.

**MC:** *Could you talk a bit about your relationship to Troma?*

**DR:** I started working with Troma in 1993. I did all kinds of modeling for poster ads for them and did a lot of skits for Cinemax that were played in-between airings of classic Troma movies. Then we did the 30 minute infomercial special called *The Troma System* that aired on Comedy Central. By 1995 we began the *Tromeo and Juliet* shoot, which was very exciting! I loved that experience. I continued working with Lloyd and Troma, but it wasn't for four years that he made his next film *Terror Firmer*. That is my favorite Troma movie I've been involved with. I've done a few movies with them since but that is still my favorite! Since then I have become even closer friends with Lloyd. We now bring each other in on outside projects that we do. I got him a role as a trannie-prostitute in a film I was shooting in Vancouver called *Hanger*. I followed that up by getting him a role as The Pope in a movie I was shooting in Rhode Island called *Nun of That*. So I try and get him things that show his comedic range. He's a great friend and always will be. I just wrote a few segments for his next book coming out called *Produce Your Own Damn movie*.

**MC:** *People put the title "Scream Queen" on you, also you're an inductee of the B-movie Hall of Fame, but people may not realize what an accomplished actress you are ( I'm thinking here of very intense roles like those in American Nightmare and Nowhere Man, and let's not forget your work on the stage). Do you feel like titles or labels like this can limit actors such as yourself?*

**DR:** I think that labels can limit but I am not against them. People feel comfortable with categories and titles and a way to define things. I don't define myself but I sympathize with people's need to define me. It's cool with me if they do. I think if people are making lists of a certain 'type' and include you that can be a good thing but if they are using the term in a derogatory way that can be bad. I've seen people use the term Scream Queen like it's a terrific and fun handle and I have seen people use it in a sentence like they would the term Sex Offender. I think it reflects more on the person who is hung up on it rather than it's subjects. I just do my thing and never think about titles. If you were to go to my web site you would not find the term posted once anywhere on the site. That says it all for me.

**MC:** *Would you have any advice for young women looking to break into this industry?*

**DR:** My advice would be to anybody seeking a career in film is to STUDY! I know that is a foreign thought to some, I have met many people wanting to get into film but taking acting classes is the last thing crossing their minds. I think because most people who want to get in movies are more interested in it for ego reasons. I am not saying all of them, but at least half the people I meet. Very few have an interest in studying, working hard, and looking at it like a life long commitment.

So my advice is study. Take smaller parts first; do you really want to star in a movie before you're ready? Take all kinds of roles and build up your talent and confidence.

**MC:** *You have had your share of trials and hard times throughout your career. Any words of caution?*

**DR:** Only work on professional sets! I don't mean only

sets that have a huge budget; it can be a micro budget film, just make sure there is a professional atmosphere. If nothing else make sure they have set insurance! My four fingers on my right hand were cut off completely, except the bone, and I went through two painful operations to gain about 70% of the ability to use them back. The use of my hand will never be completely corrected and I will always have pain. These dummies never had set insurance and I went completely bankrupt over the ordeal. So realize that sets can be dangerous and not everybody knows what they are doing even though it may sound or look like they do. Keep your eyes open and if something does not feel comfortable don't do it!

**MC:** *You make a lot of convention appearances; it's great because fans get to interact with you but is this ever a not-so-good thing? Any funny or weird stories?*

**DR:** Sadly this past year I have not made many appearances. Things have been really busy for me with the radio show and film shoots and I miss the convention circuit very much! Plus last March 2008 I had a benign tumor removed from my brain so I couldn't travel for a bit. The next convention I am slated to attend is in NY at the Fangoria Weekend of Horrors convention in June 2009. There are a few film festivals in Europe that look like they might be bringing me in so we'll see! I hope to get to more soon I very much miss them!

The weirdest thing that has ever happened at one was probably at a Chiller convention in the mid 90's when a fan asked me to sign a slice of pizza with a black marker then he ate it. [Laughs]

In 1995-ish lot of my fans were influenced by my films that were out; *Broadcast Bombshells*, *Tromeo and Juliet* and *Abducted II: The Reunion*. They probably thought from the films I was pretty wild and crazy in real life but in fact I have always been on the reserved side regardless of how sleazy the characters I have played are.

**MC:** *If readers have satellite radio they can check out your new job as co-host of Fangoria Radio. Can you tell us a bit about how that came about and what the show is like?*

**DR:** As I have mentioned we have been doing the show for almost 3 years now. I co-host the show with Twisted Sister front man Dee Snider. He's a load of fun! We get a long great. We had both worked for a company called Moe Greene Entertainment and hosted the NYC Halloween Parade for the Fuse channel. Then after that the company bought Fangoria magazine and Starlog magazine in 2004. They wanted to do a radio show and Dee and I were both naturals to ask aboard because we had both done a lot of radio in the past. It really was great that we got along so well because you never know how these things will go! We have a terrific time! It has definitely been a highlight for me in my career. I get to book and speak with great horror celebrities that I love like Clive Barker, Rob Zombie, Betsy Palmer, Mick Garris, and the stars of the Dexter TV series. The list goes on and on. Over the years we have talked to all the greats! I think Sam Raimi is the only one who has slipped through the cracks at this point but we're working on him!

It's funny because so many people want to take shots at us because we are doing really well with the show. It comes from people who do internet radio mostly. I love internet radio. I have done internet radio since 1996 when I had a horror film show at Pseudo Radio. So it's just taken

technology time to catch up to me! I think there shouldn't be any competition and that people should listen to all the horror shows and support the genre as a whole. Why people become obsessed with an 'us vs. them' mentality is beyond me. Very negative. I don't hang around negative people. Messes with my mojo. LOL! But now that Sirius and XM have merged we air the show on TWO channels with two repeats! They just changed the channel numbers so stop

by my web site for an update if you're looking to find the show on your Sirius/XM dial! Or you can go to their main web site too.

**MC:** *Could you talk about any projects you have coming up that readers should be on the lookout for?*

**DR:** Oh yes! Thanks for asking. Director Ivan Zuccon's *Colour From The Dark*, a movie I shot last year in Italy and is based on an H.P. Lovecraft story will be coming out this

year! I am very excited about this title hitting the shelves and the internet and everywhere! *The Good Sisters* is another really fun, well done movie I co-star in with April Burril, directed by Jimmy O'burril. It's a story of witchy sisters who are running from descendants of witch hunters. *Coventry Lanes* a movie directed by Mike Watt and starring myself, Brinke Stevens, Amy Lynn Best and a few others. This was a real throw back comedy horror influenced by 80's fun flicks. I just finished a really scary flick called *Hanger* which is about a 8 month pregnant street walker, played by me, who has her baby aborted against her will by her pimp. The fetus is thrown in the trash can but lives (!) and comes back for revenge! Also I play Mother Superior in the comedy *Nun of That*, I just shot a great road flick in Florida called *Stopped Dead* and I starred in the wrap around segment for the anthology flick *Gallery of Fear*. I am just about to leave for Germany where I will be shooting a brutal horror flick called *Game Over* and in a couple months I will have a really fun role in Greg Lamberson's *Slime City Massacre* which is a long awaited sequel to his 1988 cult hit *Slime City*. So a lot of really great stuff going on!

If I might add a little plug here, I just opened a merchandise page on my web site for the first time and I will be selling collectibles from my years of filmmaking - if any of the readers are interested!

**MC:** *Thank you so much for your time.*



Joe indicated the corner, back behind the old berry crates, where the shadows huddled thick and black.

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# HEATSTROKE

## Ted McAnley

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*IT WAS A DAY FOR DYING*, Joe Blakley thought two weeks later, when the heat had burned up all the grass and fully ripened the stench of decay. *It was a day for dying, but my boy tried to make it different. I should have taken care of it myself. But I didn't. And now look: I'm going back to the pond because it's the only thing left to do.*

\* \* \*

Summer came early that year, and it came as a beast empowered by what seemed a righteous anger. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of April, the rust-spotted thermostat on the back porch read eighty-two at noon. Two weeks later, Joe moved the thermostat out from under the constant shade of the overhang and into the direct sun where each day it rose easily into the nineties before eleven in the morning. The grass, in desperate need of cutting, turned crisp underfoot. By mid-May, great patches of the front and back yard had gone the color of yellow bruises. The stream that ran through the woods along the east side of the house became a rut of stones. A week into June, the long curve of the driveway had devolved to a crescent of dust as powdery as bone meal. The small house became like a furnace, and the pressing heat of the night would not allow it to cool.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, before stepping from the dark of the house into the blasting menace of sun to reach his truck, Joe told his boy a very important thing.

"I want you to get out into the woods when you see that red line pass ninety, okay?" He pointed out the dirty pane above the sink at the thermostat nailed to the tree beyond the porch.

Ben nodded, his T-shirt already sticking to his back with sweat. Yesterday, with the red line hovering at one hundred and ten degrees, he had fainted, clipping his chin on the kitchen counter. He had lain that way until his dad returned from the paper mill. The next real memory Ben had was of cold water rushing around him

as he lay fully dressed in the bathtub.

"Good," Joe said. "You could escape the heat by going down cellar, but I wouldn't want you down there all afternoon."

"Rusty hates stairs," Ben reminded him. "And he gets upset listening to the rats moving between the cinderblocks."

"Right. So get under the trees. Keep Rusty with you—and as much water as you need. Here." He brought a large silver thermos down from the cupboard and placed it beside the sink. "Keep an eye on that red line, and if it's still above ninety, you stay in the shade. You can fill this up as much as you want at the spigot out back. Sandwiches are in the lunchbox in the refrigerator—take that too. I'll be home around five."

Ben glanced over his dad's shoulder at the clock. It was almost seven.

"Same drill tomorrow," his dad went on. "Only I'll be gone early. The guys want to put in eight hours by one, to avoid the worst of this damn heat."

Ben glanced toward the open door where Rusty, his burnt-orange-and-white collie, lay panting and staring outside. He nodded again. "Okay, Dad. Can I maybe walk through the woods to Henry's house later? He's back from Eugene, and he's putting out a slip n' slide."

Joe snorted. "Yuppies shouldn't be wasting water like that. I suppose they've got air conditioning too, huh? The whole nine yards?"

Ben shrugged. He didn't know if the Claytons had air conditioning or not, but he *did* know that a slip n' slide had never sounded better.

Joe looked out the window at the thermostat for a moment, then shook his head, lifting his hands palms-up as if to surrender. "Hell, I guess. Just make sure you're not at it too long. This heat wave is supposed to last through the end of August."

"Right on!" Ben exclaimed.

His dad was already brushing by him. He grabbed his



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lunchbox from the kitchen table on his way out the door. Ben followed him as far as the shade of the house. "Be back before I'm home," his dad said, getting into the truck. His forehead was already beaded with sweat. "I don't want to holler for you."

"Sure."

The departing truck lifted dust high into the branches of surrounding trees. For a long while Ben felt as though he were drifting in a sea of fog, and that when at last the air cleared, he would not recognize his surroundings.

\* \* \*

It was a quarter after five when Joe Blakley saw his house again. He cut the engine before he had come to a complete stop. Steam billowed out from under the hood, adding to the dust clogging the air. He got out, swayed as a fainting spell rolled over him, and held on to the side mirror until it passed. Then he looked around. The total silence of the place unnerved him.

"Ben?" he called, but his parched throat managed only a conversational volume. He hissed suddenly, bringing the hand that supported him away from the side mirror. The palm was a bright pink. Joe thought it might blister.

Slowly, he went to the house and peered into the darkened kitchen. He called to his son again, this time with a little more volume, but Ben did not reply. Joe made a quick search of each room, ending with the cellar, but the kid wasn't around. Standing once again in the kitchen, breathing heavily, feeling as though the heat would drive him to his knees, Joe looked out the window at the thermostat. The red line hovered at one hundred and twelve degrees.

*He's dead, a traitorous voice said within his mind. You knew the danger, you knew how far that red line would go, but you left him alone anyway.*

Joe went quickly out back. He pumped the handle on the spigot and sat down under the icy flow, panting, blowing water out of his mouth and nose, drinking as much as he could. Five minutes later he reached above himself and pulled the handle down.

Slouched against the house in the mud, Joe heard Rusty barking distantly in the woods. He rolled forward and was on his feet and running in less than three seconds. The cold water had left him feeling fine, rejuvenated in a way he had not known since the furnace came on more than two months before. Now, hearing Ben's collie barking somewhere in the forest, Joe felt baking pinchers clamp around his heart, squeezing, squeezing, and all at once every inch of his skin was on fire again, as though he had never pumped the handle on the spigot at all, or if he had, as though only dust had coughed out of the pipes.

Rusty's barking turned fiercer, but Joe was forced to slow down.

A few minutes later, when Joe heard Ben's voice, sounding small and desperate and scared, he chanced heatstroke and ran as fast as he could.

\* \* \*

Twisted branches slapped at him, a spray of dead leaves spilled over his shoulders and into his hair like blighted moth cocoons, and then he was out in unscreened sunlight. Stumbling forward, one hand held out to shield his face

from the light, Joe saw Ben standing at the edge of what had once been a small pond. It was not even a small pond now, and only barely a large puddle. Rusty was out in the middle of the muck, covered in slimy gray mud, barking and snapping at something Joe could not see beneath the shallow water. Ben had not yet noticed his dad; he just kept calling for his collie, unwilling to get any closer to the warm, squelchy puddle.

When Joe put a hand on his son's shoulder, Ben screamed and flung himself away from him. His feet tangled, and he hit the ground on his ass.

"Oh my God," Joe said, for the first time seeing Ben's face clearly. The boy's skin was pale-gray. Sweat made his face appear waxen. His lips looked to have grown a crust of some strange fungus, but Joe quickly realized that they had chapped, cracked, and bled. The boy's eyes were round orbs filled with glassy terror. For a moment, as Ben scrambled backwards like a giant crab, Joe felt sure his boy wasn't even seeing him. Ben saw something else looming over him. Perhaps the embodiment of whatever he imagined had gotten Rusty's hackles up.

At last, Ben stopped, thin chest rising and falling dramatically, and his eyes cleared a bit. "Dad?" he croaked; Joe didn't hear this over the collie's maddened barking, but he read it on his broken lips.

Joe looked around. The thermos and lunchbox he had instructed Ben to keep with him today were nowhere in sight. He glanced at Rusty. The dog had quit barking, and had driven its muzzle into the water, shaking his head as though to catch a flirting fish or crawdad. When Rusty lifted his dripping head, the barking started up again.

"Hey!" Joe called, furious and scared. "*Rusty, quiet down!*"

The collie quieted, taking a few uncertain steps backwards. In a moment he began digging frantically, whining now instead of barking.

"Dad, there's something. . . something's in the pond. I. . . Rusty, he's. . ."

Ben looked from his dad to Rusty. Joe saw vivid red marks on the boy's neck. Scratches covered his arms. In a flash, Joe understood that Ben had never made it to Henry's. He didn't know the rest of the story, but he knew that.

Joe moved to lift his son into his arms, but Ben shook his head. "You've got to get Rusty. I can't. . . he won't listen to me. . . and I'm afraid something's going to get him."

A little more of the story became clear then. Whatever else had happened to Ben and Rusty today, they had spent most of it right here, out in this baking bald spot in the forest, breathing in the heavy reeking warmth of the pond that was no longer a pond, the collie barking himself hoarse, the boy calling until his need for water and shade were forgotten.

Joe stepped to the edge of the mud hole. He could not explain the source of his hesitation, but it was there. And it wasn't his resistance to having his boots fill with warm, smelly mud, either. It was a *fear* that nailed his feet to the ground. A fear of whatever Rusty was splashing and biting after.

"Rusty," Joe said firmly. "Get over here. Now."

The dog resumed digging.

"Right now."

Rusty started barking again.

"*Damnit, now!*"

The collie growled deep in his throat, lowering down on



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his haunches. Rusty lunged, throwing his head completely beneath the surface, hind legs kicking. In a moment, the collie lashed back, yipping in what sounded like terrible pain.

"Rusty!" Ben cried.

At last, the collie idled awkwardly toward them, mud sucking greedily at his paws. By the time Rusty reached solid ground, the dog was shaking his head and snorting as though to dislodge a stinging bee.

"I got lost," Ben said, nearly crying as Joe stooped to pick him up. "I don't know how. Maybe it was the heat, making my head all funny."

*Oh, yes, Joe thought as he began walking toward the shade of the trees. This kind of heat makes everything all funny—especially a guy's head.*

"I never did get to Henry's," Ben went on. "Later, Rusty went crazy, barking and growling at nothing I could see, and then ran off. I went after him, calling for him to stop, but he wouldn't. I think that's when I lost the thermos and lunch box. A while after that, I got to the pond. Rusty was already out in the middle, still going crazy, not listening."

Joe hesitated under the shade. He glanced down and saw Rusty panting and staring at the ground, his coat pasted with mud, some of it already drying to a crumbling glaze. The collie snorted, whined, and peered up at him as if for help.

"Good dog," Joe said. The sound of his voice caused hairs to prickle on his neck and arms. He glanced back at the mud hole before setting toward home. After the look, it was all he could do not to plunge screaming into the forest with his son bouncing in his arms, and a gray dog snorting and whining at his heels.

\* \* \*

When Joe Blakley returned from work the next day, engine running hard but not quite smoking, he found Ben waiting for him at the front door. He wore a pair of swimming trunks and nothing else. His hair was dripping wet; Joe knew it had recently been under the spigot.

"Rusty's sick," Ben said flatly, as if he expected something like this. *Joe* had expected it. Last night he'd dreamed of the pond that wasn't a pond, only the scene had been bathed in moonlight instead of sunlight and Joe had come awake screaming and clutching at sweat-dampened sheets, eyes bulging. Driving a fist into his mouth to keep from waking Ben, he had thought: *poor Rusty oh Rusty he's had a heatstroke.*

Those panicked words had made perfect sense in the dark, had made less sense when he had risen for work, and were the ravings of a lunatic by the time he took his lunch. Looking at Ben's slack face, hearing the weight of his toneless words, Joe thought now that those words made a little *too* much sense.

"Show me."

\* \* \*

Rusty was lying in the bathtub, surrounded by five inches of cold water.

"He was just so *hot*," Ben explained behind him. "Every time he'd get close it would be like standing next to an open oven."

Rusty wasn't snorting anymore, wasn't whining, but his

silence seemed like a thing bursting with physical pain. Ben had washed him under the spigot the previous evening, and his coat shined with health. But it was the horrible lack of this clean coat that momentarily stopped Joe's breathing. Orange and white hairs floated so thick in the water that it was impossible to see the bottom. The exposed skin looked mottled. Yellow mucus appeared to be seeping up in places. Rusty's eyes were almost sealed shut with the stuff. His naked muzzle dripped with it, and Joe realized that the occasional *plop! plop!* was not water beads falling from the bath faucet. Except for his shallow breathing, the collie wasn't moving. That was somehow the worst part.

"Dad?" Ben said.

Joe jumped, realizing the crazed speed at which his heart raced.

"Can we wait until tomorrow?" his son asked, in one sentence sounding six years younger. "Maybe there's still a chance he'll beat it. And if he doesn't. . . I want to be the one to put him down. He's a good dog. My best friend."

Although Ben made no sound, Joe knew that he had begun to cry.

Rusty lifted his head toward them, appearing blind. A wave of heat rolled away from the collie and over the backs of Joe's hands. They were amazingly cold.

\* \* \*

He was dreaming again. He walked in his underwear across the yard, dead grass crumbling underfoot, toward the thermostat nailed to a tree. The sun beat down like a physical weight. For a moment the light was too bright to see the red line.

*It went too high,* a voice tells him, and maybe it's his voice, but if it is he is far more terrified than he had ever known he could be. *The red line went past all those numbers and rocketed right into heatstroke country.*

His shadow fell over the thermostat. The red mercury blew out the top of the tube, spurting against the trunk like a severed jugular.

\* \* \*

Bathed in sweat, a scream barely contained behind his lips, Joe bolted upright in bed.

Out in the woods he heard a single rifle shot.

An hour later, Joe still sat wide-eyed in bed, sure that if he moved Rusty would hear him, that the dog would come clicking down the hallway to his room, that he would leap onto the bed, the canine made insane and dangerous by whatever it had stuck its muzzle into, his shape wild and snotty in the moonlight filtering through the window, that his jaws would close on his neck—

The back screen door knocked loudly against the jamb. For a moment, Joe thought it was another shot fired.

Footsteps in the hall.

A shape at the door, barely glimpsed.

"He started convulsing," Ben said plainly. "I took him out with your rifle and a shovel. I told him I loved him. And then I put him to sleep. Now he's in the ground."

Ben stood in the doorway a moment longer, as if waiting for his dad to respond. At last, the boy went away. Joe expected to hear the kid crying, but he was greeted only with silence.

Joe rode that silence, sitting straight up in bed, staring at

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nothing, until the alarm buzzed for him at four-thirty.

\* \* \*

On June 28<sup>th</sup>, a mild breeze stirred loose the gummy, weighted air. The breeze came like puffs of dragon breath: hot and stinking of decay. It was that damn mud hole out there in the woods, Joe knew. Despite the distance, it smelled far worse than he remembered, as though in the five days since he'd been there the sun had pulled from it a singular foulness: it was the marshy-rot stench of gangrene. Once, about five years ago, a possum had crawled under the porch and died there. The stink of the animal as it decomposed had been close to this, but not quite as green, not quite as moist in the nose. Caught in morbid reverie, Joe recalled how the rats had scurried away when he tugged the bloated creature into sunlight, how the possum's eyes had been filled with squirming maggots, and how huge beetles crawling with their own tiny vermin lumbered through the animal's wiry, matted hair.

In the four days since Rusty's moonlight burial, Joe took his son to the Claytons in the morning and picked him up again on his way back from work. Each day Ben had a new story for his dad (the best being the one about how Mrs. Clayton's jugs had tumbled from her bikini when, after one too many martinis, she had flung herself down the sleek yellow ribbon of the slip n' slide), each day Ben's tan went a little deeper until his skin was rich and olive, and each day Joe became more and more convinced that the kid was going to be okay. But upon returning home, the fetid stink of the pond would roll over him like a miasma and he would think *No, Ben won't be okay. Neither of us will be, ever again.*

When Saturday came, Joe found himself rolling out of bed at five-thirty with the intent of picking up some overtime. Dudelson had offered more on Sunday, and Joe took that too.

\* \* \*

Joe Blakely had no idea what day of the week it was when he pulled up in front of the Clayton's sprawling home and was greeted not with Ben and Henry dashing around the side of the house, dripping-wet and grinning, or with Mr. Clayton sauntering over in his grubs from the immaculate flower garden to shoot the shit, but with perfect, deadened silence.

Stepping out of the truck, Joe felt a surge of déjà vu crash over him like a wave. It was like the day he had returned home to find Ben and Rusty gone. Even the breeze had died. Joe thought: *They're at the pond. And if I don't hurry they're all going to suffer a heatstroke.* But the smell of decay was not here, and the idea held less power than it otherwise would have.

Nobody answered the front door when he knocked.

He cupped his hands around his mouth and hailed the boys, but the heavy silence that followed made his voice sound devoid of power, useless.

The truck overheated halfway down his driveway.

Standing in a cloud of steam and dust, Joe called for his boy. And because he didn't expect an answer, he began walking around the house before the name left his throat. On his way, he caught a whiff of the foulest odor he had ever known. His eyes watered. His throat worked against

a sudden need to vomit. Staggering, one hand held up to cover his mouth and nose, Joe entered the forest.

The pond that was no longer a pond was now hardly a mud puddle. Except for an irregular pool in the center, no water remained. The tracks left by Rusty were vivid punctures in the gray-brown muck. Those left by himself and Ben were less defined because neither of them had gone beyond solid ground. Joe was alone here. Alone except for whatever lay buried beneath the mud. He could feel it thrumming in his head like heat shimmering above concrete. . .and really he supposed he had been able to feel it since the end of May, right around the time when the pond would have been only two or three inches deep.

But this kind of heat had a way of making a guy's head all funny, and so he had written it off as the effects of one bitch of a hot summer.

The smell struck him then. Not its intensity, but the lack of it. He could detect no difference between the way this place had smelled—marshy and warm with a hint of rotting plant-matter—the first time he'd been here and the way it smelled now.

Dread fell into the pit of his stomach. Backing away from the mud hole, hands up and shaking as though to ward off an attack, Joe realized with terrible clarity where Ben was, and why.

\* \* \*

He checked the thermostat before entering the house. The red line teased one hundred and twelve degrees. Wiping sweat off his face, his vision threatening to darken as the heat tried to press him into fainting, Joe went from the dead yard and into the dark, boiling chambers of the house. He took his rifle from the corner in the kitchen, and worked the lever-action until he saw the dull copper of Ben's empty cartridge peek out at him. He popped it free, loaded a fresh one, and turned toward the cellar. As he did, a rat scurried across the linoleum.

He had heard the vermin squeaking and scratching in his dreams, he realized. And something else. . .a kind of low, whining; like a dog suffering severe pain and loneliness.

How could he have missed this? he wondered. But the answer was there before he had finished asking the question: he'd had a heatstroke, that was how. The special kind, served up from gray-brown mud.

He opened the cellar door.

He heard the quick patter-click of rats scampering along the walls, heard Rusty moaning thinly in a back corner, heard a small voice speaking words too softly to be heard, and another voice sounding afraid and not so quiet.

Faintly, Joe smelled smoke on the air.

But by then he had begun to descend the stairs, and soon the debilitating stink of the cellar overcame everything else.

And then he was down.

\* \* \*

Ben and Henry stood in a thin rectangle of sunlight spilling through the narrow window three feet above them. Ben had Henry's left arm torqued behind his friend's back, gripping it fiercely. Henry resisted moving forward, eyes wide and streaming with tears, his heels digging grooves

in the earthen floor. The tendons stood out in Ben's neck as he persisted with whatever he was saying into Henry's ear. Joe still couldn't make out what it was because Henry kept saying "No, no, no, I don't wanna" in a voice that had grown substantially in volume.

At last Ben's voice rose in what sounded like hurt frustration: "C'mon, just pet him! He's a good dog, just like always, and he's lonely. You guys used to be friends. Just reach out and—"

"Ben, what have you done?" Joe asked firmly.

Ben jerked as though physically slapped. He let go of Henry immediately, and the scared kid bolted past Joe and pounded up the stairs.

Joe indicated the corner, back behind the old berry crates, where the shadows huddled thick and black. "What have you got back there, Ben?" he asked. "Have you got maybe something you shouldn't?"

Ben stood motionless, lower lip quivering. From behind the crates, Joe heard a moan so full of misery that it sounded almost human.

"Answer your dad, Ben," Joe said, hands slick on the rifle. "Now."

"I just wanted Rusty to get better again!" Ben cried. "He was my best friend, better even than Henry, and now he's . . . he's. . ."

Joe tried to whistle for Rusty, but found he had no spit. In a hoarse voice he barely recognized, he called the collie's name. That whining again as Rusty shifted back there; perhaps he was trying to stand. Rats squeaked, and spread around Ben's ankles in a wave. Then something larger appeared around the crates. Joe belatedly realized that it was a head: a wet and shining and hairless thing extending from a neck of jumping tendons. Rusty was blind, but the dog was looking toward him anyway, whining and moaning and dripping with some thick snotty substance.

"Now he just eats the rats," Ben said. "That's all he can do. Sometimes he hurts himself on the bones."

From the world above, Henry's voice came to them: "*Fire! Fire! Mr. Blakely, your house is burning up!*"

\* \* \*

Joe snagged his son by the arm and had gotten halfway up the stairs before he noticed Rusty lurching after them. There was no malicious intent in the collie, only a kind of sorrowful loyalty that scared Joe in ways he had never been scared before. Ben, wailing and crying, tried wriggling free, one arm outstretched for the pitiful horror dragging its clumsy, blind self up the risers. And it occurred to Joe that his son might have lost his mind completely.

In the kitchen, the smell of smoke masked the reek of the following dog. Flames jumped beyond the front windows; beyond the open door, Joe saw that the tall, brown grass of the front yard leaped with flames. He saw where he had parked his truck, now a giant ball of curling fire, and understood: the overheated engine block had ignited the grass beneath it.

Nearing the open back door, Joe glanced back to see Rusty standing in the kitchen, looking as though he did not know which way to go. In the next second, the dog turned toward the blazing storm beyond the front door and lurched away, toward relief.

"No!" Ben shrieked. "*Rusty!*"

Joe stepped down from the back porch, still looking over his shoulder, and as he came out of the shade, blinding sunlight blasted him full in the face. He heard a brittle little explosion near the tree where the thermostat hung. Pain blasted through his brain. He screamed, both hands flying up to cover his face, and then fell over in the baking dust.

\* \* \*

Joe Blakely came to with the smell of burning flesh in his nose—his son's flesh, and the flesh of the boy's best friend. Sunlight crushed him to the ground. The side of his face that lay exposed to the sky was searing with pain. If he lived long enough, the skin would surely blister and scar.

He sat up with a tremendous effort and looked around.

The house was choked with fire and smoke.

Rats poured squeaking into the sunlight from the back door. Some of them were on fire.

Henry lay dead on his back a short distance behind him. The thermostat had exploded, which should have been impossible, but the sharp plastic shards jutting from the side of Henry's face and left eye proved otherwise.

Joe's rifle lay on the ground beside him. Hands burning with the heat stored in the weapon, he used it as a crutch to gain his feet.

He swayed, waiting to see if he would have another heatstroke. When the dizziness lifted, he started toward the pond, thinking about the day he had come into the clearing and seen Rusty barking and digging for something in the center.

*It was a day for dying,* Joe thought.

\* \* \*

There were two bodies lying facedown in the center of the mud hole when he returned. He didn't need to slop out there to know they were Henry's parents, but he slopped out there just the same, rifle aimed at a place in the mud between their grime-pasted heads. He didn't know if the Claytons had gone looking for Ben and Henry, or if the pond had called them here the way it had first called Rusty. It didn't matter. This place had gotten what it wanted in either case.

*It's stronger now,* Joe thought, feeling a heavy presence all around him. *The heat's burning up the pond, and now the thing under the mud is almost uncovered—whatever the hell that thing is.*

Joe fired one round into the mud.

Nothing.

He began digging with the toe of his boot.

He saw a swirl of rainbow flash down there, and then the mud closed the image off.

Compelled beyond his control, Joe got down on his knees and began shoveling mud away with his hands, peripherally aware that Mr. and Mrs. Clayton had done this same thing not long before. When he saw that slick, glossy-rainbow eye again, he began heedlessly shoveling mud into his mouth.

An hour later he lay unmoving on his back, belly bulging, the mud covering his face dried to a cracked glaze by the heat.



When the rocks struck it, each with a harsh, papery sound, they left gashes in it, out of which oozed blots of brackish ichor that plunked down in the water and then dissolved like Cobalt Violet paint in a vat of turpentine.

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# WE TAKE DEATH TO GO TO A STAR

David Misialowski

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MARS BLACK, THE COLOR OF THE STREET. Officer John Sky was cruising on Main Street, the blacktop road that cut as straight as lance of black oil paint produced by the thrust of a palette knife on canvas, beyond the town limits toward a field where it no longer was named Main.

"Sky, you OK?"

"What?"

"Seems like you ain't listenin'."

"I'm listening."

"I'm talkin' about Linda."

"Who?"

"Who? Linda! My new girl. She's fine. Know what I'm sayin'?"

Ralph Hogg, Sky's partner, nudged Sky in the ribs, and grinned.

"Sure, Ralph. Sure, I do."

Hogg scrutinized Sky, and then said, "Seems like you in Dreamland again, pal."

"What?"

"That dreamy way you get. Head in the clouds." Hogg gestured at his head.

"Me?"

"Makes you the target of fun at the stationhouse. That and the painting."

"The painting?"

"Purty pitchers."

"What?"

"Painting purty pitchers. That's what they say, dude."

Through his wraparound shades, Sky squinted through the cruiser's tinted windshield at the glare. This was San Joaquin Delta July, a Diebenkornucopia of color: sienna, ochre, red and green. The distant, rounded, sunyellowed hills reminded him of lions sleeping under the sun, and he thought about the primitivist paintings of Henri Rousseau.

"Who are 'they,' Ralph?"

"Hell, everyone!"

Hogg had never mentioned Sky's hobby before. Sky felt ill at ease, and even ticked off. A vein throbbed in the side of his head. Sky was also annoyed that Hogg pronounced "pretty" as "purty," and "pictures" as "pitchers."

Dumb ass.

"My pictures are not pretty, Ralph. They're meaningful."

"Hey, hey! OK, buddy! Whatever you say!" Hogg threw up his hands in mock surrender. In one of them, he held a half-eaten jelly donut. Crumbs fell from his lips. "Meaningful! Huh!"

Sky glanced sidelong at Hogg. The jelly was Cobalt Violet, and his uniform Cobalt Blue. Hogg himself was a Cadmium Redneck.

An hour later Sky was cruising alone on Main. Hogg had taken sick, and Sky had dropped him off at the stationhouse. It was four in the afternoon, a fine Rothko



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sky with red and purple bands at the horizon.

He parked at Hopper's Diner. Debbie the waitress, bent and haggard like one of Van Gogh's overworked peasants, liked to tell him her troubles. Her 10-year-old twins, Brad and Darren, were the school bullies. Their dad, Debbie's husband, had abandoned the family and fled fifty miles west to San Francisco, where he was living with his gay lover.

Sky ate his meat loaf in silence while Debbie kept pouring him fresh cups of coffee. Brad and Darren were both flunking and running with a bad crowd, and then there was the high cost of living to consider because, "How far do you think I can stretch the paycheck of a waitress, Jack? How far, huh?"

Her boys, Debbie stressed, tilting her head to catch Sky's evasive eyes, needed a man's discipline. Honestly, they needed a *Dad*.

Sky needed the check, and he asked for it, too. He did not leave a tip.

An hour later he was driving on Main again. If he drove another mile, he would find a field of tumbleweeds and power lines where Main no longer was named Main, and the freeway beyond. If he got on it and drove west, he could be in San Francisco in an hour. He could find a cheap hotel, and decide what to do.

*Too late,* a voice, patient as paint, whispered in his head. *Too late for San Francisco, John.*

Too late.

When he was a boy, he would park his bike in that field, and watch the sun go down.

And he would dream.

When night came he would stare agog at the stars as Van Gogh had seen them, whorls of lamplights in the riptides of space: *Starry, starry night...* Van Gogh's stars had looked like flying saucers.

As a boy he had promised himself that he would eventually leave this backwater, this dump, and not become a cop like his dad. Back then, a lonely boy without friends, he loved two things: art and science fiction. Chesley Bonestell's paintings of distant worlds had fired his passion for both. San Francisco was where he was going. There, he would study art.

In those days, it didn't seem possible for him to become a cop, even if he had wanted to. The school bullies had made Sky their special target. This memory was crosscut with that of the football that would thump into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him while his father mockingly ordered him to "toughen up, you knuckleheaded faggot!" After that would come the blows to the head, the kicks and the cuffs. His mother had died when Sky was three years old, and remained for him, in memory, a vague charcoal sketch.

His father, filled with demented vicarious ambitions, had decided that Sky would be an N.F.L. quarterback. One time he caught Sky painting a picture. He broke the paintbrushes, and rubbed Sky's nose in the paint. The red paint smelled like blood in a nosebleed. Sky never forgot the piquant odor of paintblood.

His father had unflinchingly displayed toughness all his life until that unbearably hot July day (the low 72 and the high 95) when he locked himself in the bathroom, drew his police revolver and blew his brains out. Sky discovered the body. Dad's brains made an interesting drip pattern on the bathroom mirror, of Ivory White and Cadmium Red. Later,

Sky became a cop. He never studied art, never lived in San Francisco, never did shit. He was a cop, like Dad. He now reflected: an apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

It fell from the sky.

Sky saw it streaking downward. Then he saw a flash of light, and heard a thunderclap.

He turned on the siren, and stepped on the gas. A minute later he parked the car, climbed a ridge and looked down in astonishment at the field by the freeway. Smoking wreckage was strewn across it, and little licks of fire rose up brightly in the dusk with come-hither finger-like motions.

He trotted down toward the debris, and saw figure studies darting away from it and over a rise. He grasped his gun, wondering whether he ought to give chase. But he didn't.

Instead he patrolled the field, kicking at pieces of metal. The crashed disc lay half buried in the ground, in a crater that it had gouged out. He cautiously approached the disc, extending a hand, and on his palm he could feel the heat rolling off it in waves. He bent over and peered through a hole in the disc, and saw, inside, a diminutive corpse sprawled across the floor like a smear of Pollock paint, but it wasn't human.

He sprinted back to his cruiser, jumped behind the wheel and grabbed the police radio. As he was about to speak, the radio gave off a burst of static and someone shouted, "Sky!"

He stared dumbly at the radio. Then, in a stilted and mechanical way, the speaker recited the numbers 72 and 95, like a mad quarterback stuck in his signal count: "Seventy-two! Ninety-five! Seventy-two! Ninety-five!"

Sky sensed a presence to his left, on the other side of the driver's-side window.

His eyes slowly crawled in that direction.

When he saw what was peering at him from the other side of the window, its eyes squashed against it, he nearly lost his meat loaf.

Fighting down panic, he fumblingly drew his revolver and pointed it, with a shaking hand, at the glass. But instead of firing, he squeamishly tapped the gun barrel on the window. The thing on the other side ducked out of sight, leaving behind, on the window, mottled patches of viscous linseed oil.

"Seventy-two! Ninety-five! Sev..."

"Shut up!" he roared at the radio, and then ripped it out of the dashboard. The recitation ceased, but only for a moment.

When it resumed, it was coming from inside his head.

He screamed and clapped his hands to his face, and then he Mars Blacked out.

When he awoke, he was driving again on Main, and night had fallen. The stars whorled. He recalled nothing of what had happened, but the wreckage of his radio stunned him.

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Ralph Hogg figured he'd eaten one too many jelly doughnuts, and that was why he'd gotten sick. One too many? Or is that, one *two* many? Hey, that's pretty good. What do they call that? A pun? He'd ask brainiac Head-in-the-Clouds, the purty pitcher painter, the next time that they cruised.

Hogg intended to take a nap. First, though, he wandered into the kitchen. He opened the fridge and reached inside

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for the OJ, but the carton was empty. Hogg found this odd, because he'd bought it yesterday and could recall drinking from it only once. Because he lived alone except for his cat, Vinegar, no one else could have drunk from it.

"Vinegar! Hey, Vinegar! Where are you? Did you get into the OJ?"

He wandered into the living room and looked around, but found no cat.

Funny.

He ambled down the hall toward his bedroom, and stopped. The door was ajar.

"Vinegar? You in the bedroom?"

He gently pushed the door open, and immediately stepped on something gray and supple that squirmed vitally underfoot like a bundle of live eels. A moment later it let out a terrible, inhuman screech.

"Oh, my God!" Hogg clutched his chest, and reeled backward.

It whipped up through the air, and landed atop his dresser with a thump.

"Vinegar, you done scared the shit out me!"

The cat meowed, and placidly licked a paw.

God, Hogg thought shakily, standing before the mirror on his dresser and starting to peel off his uniform. Freakin' cat's always underfoot.

As he unbuttoned his shirt, admiring in the mirror what he deemed to be his lady-killing face, he wondered again about the mystery of the OJ. Looking down and to his left, he saw, still atop the dresser and reflected in the mirror, Vinegar.

Vinny was squatting, and arching its back. It was peering fixedly at something on the other side of the room, across the bed by the open window.

"Vinny? You OK?"

Suddenly it hissed, and its fur spiked. Hogg looked into the mirror, and saw the window on the other side of the room reflected in it.

The window was open. A white curtain stirred in a breeze. He saw the intruder standing behind the curtain, in a patch of moonlight. It stood in a puddle of orange juice. It was absolutely black, like the world's blackest shadow but without a form to cast it. Its large dark head barely cleared the windowsill. Suddenly orange juice squirted out of it, and sizzled down onto the carpet.

Hogg giddily thought: OJ mystery solved! Then he crapped his pants from sheer terror. A moment later his knees buckled and he sagged to the floor while clawing at his chest.

\* \* \*

Five days later, Officer Sky was again cruising on Main.

He glanced at the empty seat beside him. Soon, he would be assigned a new partner. The fatal heart attack hardly had been a surprise, even though Ralph was only 39. Even Hogg had admitted that his doctor had warned him about his diet, weight and lack of exercise.

Sky smiled.

He cruised onto Park Road. Debbie the waitress lived here. She had invited him to Park on several occasions, but he had always rebuffed these overtures. Now he seemed to be guiding the cruiser toward her house. As it came into view, he saw a figure thrashing in the backyard swimming

pool. Debbie darted into the street in front of his cruiser, and he slammed on the brakes and tumbled out.

"Debbie, what's the matter?"

She grabbed his hand and led him into the yard. He saw sprays of yellow and pink daffodils in a trellis, and thought about Pissarro. Then the mad quarterback in his mind started calling signals again:

*Seventy-two! Ninety-five!*

Debbie's twins had trapped it in the pool.

It thrashed wildly in the water. When the rocks struck it, each with a harsh, papery sound, they left gashes in it, out of which oozed blots of brackish ichor that plunked down in the water and then dissolved like Cobalt Violet paint in a vat of turpentine.

Sky snatched his gun from his holster, raised it and pointed it at the intruder in the pool. Its impossible eyes met his, and he lowered the gun. Then he gave Brad and Darren a hard but fatherly glare. The twins, who had been laughing, stopped throwing rocks. Sulking, they trooped back into the house.

Sky looked back to his left, in time to see it scrambling over the side of the pool. Then it was gone.

"Jack, what the hell *was* that thing?"

"A raccoon, Debbie. Just a wild raccoon."

"Jack, for Chrissake, that was *no* raccoon!"

"No, I suppose not." Sky put away his gun. "But isn't it reassuring to think so?"

"Jack!"

"Forget it, Deb. Just forget it."

Without intending to do so, he reached awkwardly for her, and gave her a dry peck on the cheek.

\* \* \*

Five years later, Officer Sky was again cruising on Main.

Another July. He turned onto Park, cruised, and turned the car into the driveway. As he parked and got out, he could see swimming pool in the yard, along with the trellis overflowing with pink and yellow daffodils, blots of impressionistic color that some sensitive soul had produced with a stippled brush. He strolled up the steps to the front door, which opened. Debbie stood behind it, a flawless figurine of the pre-Raphaelite persuasion. She kissed him on the cheek, leaving behind a crimson peck of paint.

She asked, "How was your day, hon?"

"Fine. Yours?"

"OK."

"How are the kids, Deb?"

"OK."

"Well, good."

When the twins got home, the family had dinner. Later, Sky retreated to his studio, with its high ceiling and good northern light. It was full of paintings propped on easels, a disguise for the paintings that he had hidden behind them.

One of those hidden painting now gave off fans of black radiance from a sliver formed by two paintings in front of it. They looked like light rays, but they were dark, like shadows.

He reached for the painting, and brought it out.

The isolated figure portrayed in this work faced the viewer while standing on a bleak, cold and empty plain below a frigid and turbulent sky that Sky had painted in polar

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colors of blue, white and gray; stark and gloomy hues that were on the opposite side of the color wheel from the ochre, sienna and green that dominated the Diebenkornucopia of the San Joaquin Delta.

Its slanted, black oval eyes were so big and weird that they resembled immense wraparound shades. Spots of impastoed Ivory White made highlights on those bleak and fathomless eyes, which were embedded in a vaguely insectoid head: a triangular wedge that converged downward to form a point at the chin.

It had no mouth.

Its head sat atop a tall and slender neck, like that of a praying mantis. The body below was diminutive, naked and sexless. Except for the white highlights on the eyes, the creature was all black, Mars Black. It faced the viewer with its feet spread and its arms extended from its shrunken rubberdoll body, and its fingers and toes tapered into cylindrical forms that resembled gun barrels.

Sky had worked on this and his other secret studies obsessively from both imagination and, dimly, so it seemed, from memory. He didn't know why he had made them, or what they meant. He knew only that he did not dare to show them to anyone. If he did, they'd probably lock him up and throw away the key.

He put away the painting, and felt empty and funny inside. He briefly thought of his unlikely marriage to Debbie, and how it had constituted a form of surrender, although to whom or what or why he was unable to say.

For a time he studied, with little enthusiasm, a Delta landscape on which he had been working for months. It had started out green, ochre and blue; but over time he had darkened it, tinting the landscape as if the sun were setting upon it.

He contemplated the work for a few moments. Then he reached for an open can of Mars Black paint.

He dipped a palette knife into the can, scooped out a dollop of the paint and then smeared a great X across the landscape.

Later, after cleaning up, he joined Debbie and the twins in the living room. It was a scene of blissful Norman Rockwell domesticity. The kids were parked cross-legged on the floor in front of the TV, and Debbie was doing a crossword puzzle. The house was full of cozy furniture, as well as knickknacks.

Debbie was crazy for knickknacks. Why?

Because they were pretty.

Just like his pictures.

Hogg had been right. His stuff was pretty.

Pretty worthless.

Sky thought about that odd word, *knickknacks*. Then he studied the twins. Identical duncolored mops of hair decorated their heads, and pointillist freckles adorned their cheeks. Before, when they had been snot-nosed bullies on the outskirts of adolescence, like the bullies who had tormented him when he was a schoolboy, Sky had privately projected bad outcomes for them, and had reveled in these predictions of pregnant girlfriends, drunken driving arrests and other disasters.

But now that they were his stepsons, he saw that they would probably turn out OK—at least, no worse than anyone else. One of them even wanted to be an N.F.L. quarterback.

This was, indeed, a scene of blissful Norman Rockwell

domesticity.

Why, then, did he keep thinking of Hieronymus Bosch?

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Sky was on Main. The call came over the police radio. He activated the siren and stepped on the gas. He raced up Main and hung a right onto Jung Way. He saw the jackknifed truck. The dispatcher said it had hit a pedestrian.

Sky swerved the cruiser to a stop, threw open the door and jogged toward the truck. A knot of people had gathered, and several were kneeling around a prone figure. He saw a woman's legs splayed on the street and immediately recognized Debbie's shoes, one of which had flown off her foot and landed nearly fifty feet away beside the curb, leaving a Cadmium Red print on the pavement.

\* \* \*

Yet another July had arrived, the sun big and terrifying. Sky let himself in the front door. The twins, now 17, were in the living room, in front of the TV. Sky decided not to disturb them. He retreated to his studio.

It was empty of paintings.

He had destroyed them all, even the secret works, in a bonfire on the summer solstice midnight in the field of power lines and tumbleweeds where Main was no longer named Main, by the freeway that led to the mirage of San Francisco. He had arranged them in ever-widening concentric circles so that together they had formed an enormous mandala spread out over the ground, and then like a mandala or an ouroboros, it had consumed itself when he had set the torch to it under the Van Gogh stars that themselves had resembled mandalas of fire, and as the circles of fire had leapt toward the stars he had closed his eyes and dreamt.

He had dreamt that he was moving above and beyond the tawny town and toward the sevenhilled summit of San Francisco, lodged in its Kilimanjarolike ice-cap of fog. He had thought that San Francisco was where he was going, but instead he had continued to turn up and away from the earth, and toward the stars.

In his dreams, he sometimes relived an incident that occurred seven summers ago in the field by the freeway. But waking up, the memory of the dream always vanished like a water mirage on a highway.

Sky stared at his desktop computer. Stacks of printouts were piled next to it. He had downloaded them from fringe Web sites after obsessively Googling terms that had come to him as in a vision: Area 51. Groom Lake. Dreamland.

*Seems like you in Dreamland again. That dreamy way you get. Head in the clouds. Target of fun. Purty pitchers.*

Still in uniform, he removed his wraparound shades and patted his holster. Then he looked at his TV. Some of his late wife's knickknacks were on top of it.

Knickknacks, he mused, reflectively.

He turned on the TV. His father was reading a weather report.

"Cloudy and hazy tomorrow, and very humid, with a chance of late afternoon 'purty pitchers' and knuckleheaded knickknacks."

Sky closed his eyes, and a vein throbbed in the side of his head.

---

“Today’s low was a warm 72. ...”  
OK, Sky thought. Seventy-two.  
“...and the high was an unbearable 95, you faggot.”  
Ninety-five, Sky reflected.  
Today’s low was 72. And the high an unbearable 95. And  
I’m a faggot.  
*Seventy-two! Ninety-five! Hut! Hut!*  
See, Daddy? See?  
I’m a quarterback after all!  
But someone else is calling the plays.  
The phone rang.  
“Hello?”  
“Sky!”

Sky yanked the receiver away from his ear, and stared at it in horror. Then he put it back.

The speaker told Sky that he was on the phone with the mother ship, which was the biggest star depicted in Van Gogh’s painting “Starry Night.” Van Gogh knew about us, the speaker said, and that was OK, because he, like you, was one of us: an alien on this earth. Hogg and Debbie had been eliminated as a precaution, the speaker said, but unfortunately two witnesses remained who were connected with the incident seven summers ago, when one of Van Gogh’s stars had fallen from the sky, and crashed to the earth.

Their submerged memories could go off at any time like time-release depth charges, the mother ship told Sky. Only he must know. Thus would his life be redeemed.

Sky shut his eyes, and his own submerged memories of that encounter seven summers ago came back to him. They rose to the surface, and broke the water line of his mind. He thought about his painting of the diminutive black monster, a painting that he had destroyed with all the others. Now he knew who the subject of that painting had really been.

The speaker gave Sky his orders. When he was finished carrying them out, the speaker assured him, a disc-shaped painter’s palette studded with luminous dots of paint around its perimeter would arrive from the sky and take him home to the sky. Sky recalled Van Gogh’s observation that we take a train to go to a town but we take death to go to a star, and then the line went dead.

Sky hung up and strolled to the living room. Darren, the high school quarterback, opened his mouth to say, Hi, Dad, but then his mouth curled into the O of The Scream in the Munch painting when he saw what Sky was pointing at him. Sky shot him. Then he shot Brad. Paint came out of the boys, Rose Madder mixed with Mars Black.





“I shot Mr. Loomney. He wanted the eight-ball, I could tell. I tied him up with weights from his house and went out and threw him in the middle of the lake.”

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# EIGHT BALL

## Jeffrey Conolly

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“**B**LESS ME FATHER FOR I HAVE SINNED,” the man on the other side of the grate’s voice seemed tired, his silhouette haggard. “Is that what I’m suppose to say? I’ve ain’t never done this before.”

Father Greyman simply smiled and nodded, “You can say whatever you like,” The man’s breath came in nervous gasps between his words, and there was a thick smell of alcohol. He would let the man say whatever he wanted, and get out of there.

“I’m here ‘cus I’ve done some bad things, really bad things. I ain’t never really been religious, not really. My wife always tried to drag me, but she was Baptist.” He paused at this, his breathing getting quicker.

“Don’t expect you’ll believe me. Hell, I don’t. But I gotta get it off my chest. I have to tell somebody, you know.”

*Get to the point, Greyman thought.*

“I killed my wife.”

Greyman choked back a gasp.

“I know it’s, bad, real bad. I killed my deputy too, and that man down by the lake. Mr. Loomney. It ain’t my fault though, honest to G.O.D., it aint. It’s the eight-ball’s.”

“The what?” Greyman thought about leaving. He wanted to leave, but he never had before, and he never would. It was part of wearing the collar. Sometimes you heard things that made you lean on the Father more than ever before. Infidelity, homosexuality, promiscuity, he had heard it all before.

But murder?

No. Never murder. And never, “An eight-ball?”

“I’m getting ahead of myself. It all started that night, about a week ago, when there was that big storm. Ain’t been a storm like that in years in Lanfred. You couldn’t see more than a foot in front of your car, and Ben Noonan’s kid hit a guy.

“Jimmy’s only sixteen, only just got his license, and when me an’ Walter got there, Jimmy was real shook up. He said the guy came out a nowhere, like we hadn’t heard that before, but I didn’t push it. He was crying. There was a big ol’ dent in his car and the man’s body was sprawled out in the middle of the road. ‘You call your Dad yet?’ I asked.

‘No.’ He said. ‘He’s gonna kill me,’ he said, and started crying again.

“Deputy Morgan is gonna take you to the car, so you can call him,” I said. Walter put an arm around the kid—Walt was good at stuff like that—and took him over to the car. While the kid was distracted I looked at the body.

“The man was dead all right. The arm . . . well . . . no arm is supposed to bend like that. Something just seemed off about the body though, something just felt *wrong*.”

“What?” Greyman asked.

“He was wearing a pinstripe suit for one. Who where’s pinstripes in Lanfred? But it was something else. It was just . . . wrong. I can’t explain it. The man had all the

pieces, mouth, eyes, nose, ears . . . but still. He was tall, probably the tallest man I'd ever seen. I decided I had to look around for his wallet, you know to identify him. And that's when I found it."

"That thing? The, what did you call it?"

"The eight-ball. It was in his the breast pocket of that pinstripe jacket—just hanging out in there. The guy had nothing else on him, no keys, no wallet, nothing. Just that fuh . . . freaking eight-ball."

"Like from a pool table?"

"Yeah, only this, this was . . ."

Greyman tried to peer through the grates to see exactly what the sheriff was doing. He had pulled something out of his pocket—he had to strain to get it—and was staring at it. He paused for a long time.

Just when Greyman was about to say something, the Sherriff continued, "It was beautiful. It was perfect. It was . . ." The sheriff coughed, trying to regain himself. "It was more than that though, the ball had powers."

"Powers?"

"Yeah. It started to . . . to *talk*."

"To Talk?" Greyman realized he was quickly becoming an echo. He was really at a lost to do anything else. This man needed a psychologist more than a man of the cloth.

"Not talk really, that's not right. But I could hear what it wanted, and it wanted me to take it. I can't explain how I knew, I just did. And it got worse too."

"How so?"

"I could read people's thoughts. Crazy, I know, but as soon as Walter came back I heard 'em, clear as the rain that was getting us all soaked. I heard Walter's voice in my own head. First it said: 'Poor kid, father's gonna kill him for sure.' I was thrown back. It couldn't be, just couldn't be. But I was starrin' right at 'em and his lips weren't moving. 'Find anything?' Walter said. I was clutching the eight-ball, gripping it tightly. And then I did something I hadn't done in fifteen years as an officer. I stole and I lied."

"Naw," I said. "Nothing." And I slipped the eight-ball in my pocket. And when I did, it just felt so . . . so . . . *right*."

"We had to wait till the ambulance came and the kid's parents came—the kid's car was fine, but he didn't feel like driving anymore. Ben asked me if Jimmy was in deep for this, and a said probably so, vehicular manslaughter ain't no small order. While I answered all there questions my hand rarely left my pocket. I knew it was crazy, but I could hear their thoughts, all of them. The mom was thinking 'My baby, my poor baby, I knew it was too soon to drive.' And the Dad was thinking, 'Damn it, how will we ever get out of this?' It's crazy but I knew it was their thoughts."

"The ambulance showed up, and they put him on a stretcher. I told you he was tall, right? Tallest guy I'd ever seen. He didn't fit on the stretcher. He was too long for it." The sheriff laughed. Greyman cringed. "When they did get 'im in, he was so tall that they had to bend his legs back to shut the door."

"Me and Walt thanked the paramedics for coming out so late and made our way back to the station. We were driving back when I heard his thoughts again, 'Such a nice guy, kind of makes me feel guilty.'"

"Guilty 'bout what?" I said. I hadn't realized it was his thoughts."

"I didn't say anything," Walt said. It was eerie, real

frickin' eerie. 'What was that about?' Walt's voice said again in my head. 'Does he know about me and Kristen?'"

"Is Kristen you're wife?" Greyman asked.

"Ya, for fourteen years. Fourteen years and I find out on a rainy car ride home that she's shnapping my best friend. Not from him, though, no. It's gotta be that thing, that eight-ball—it was the only thing being honest with me. It was telling me to . . . It was telling me to take my gun and shoot him. It was telling me to do it, and it took every inch of me not to do it, right there, right then."

"We filed our paperwork and went home. I didn't even want to talk to Kristen. I didn't even want to see her. I smoked three cigarettes before I went to bed that night—I smoke 'em when I'm edgy, ever since I had to stop drinkin'." I slept on the couch, clutching the thing, all night long.

"That night I dreamt about doing it. I shot 'em both with my gun—Kristen only once, but Walt five times—and buried both in the garden in the backyard. It was the most realistic dream I'd ever had. I could feel the shovel. I could feel the summer heat as I dug. I could feel the sweat on my face. I could . . ."

"Kristen was shaking me 'Are you ok?' she asked. My face *was* sweating. I looked at my hand. It was still clutching the eight-ball. It was blood red, and my knuckles were white. 'What's that?' She asked. I got up immediately, shielding that hand from her view."

"Nothing," I said. I wanted to leave the house. I had to get out, I had to leave. All I could think of was shooting my wife, shooting Walt, and burying them in the backyard. I heard her say, 'Where are you going?' as I grabbed my keys and went towards the door. As I was shutting the door I heard, not by my ears, but in my mind, "Maybe Walt was right. Maybe he *does* know about us."

"I got out in the yard and threw up. It was too much for me to handle. I got in my car, but didn't leave for a long time. I just starred at the eight-ball. It was so beautiful. I couldn't help myself. I just sat there, starring at it."

"When I got to the station there was a message waiting for me to call the coroner. I went in the office and called, using one hand—one was holding the eight-ball. I wanted a cigarette but was running out of hands. 'This the Sheriff?' said the guy on the other line. I said yes. 'That John Doe you sent us is something else. I'm not sure how to tell you this . . . his organs are . . . his organs are all *wrong*.'"

"Are you telling me now this guy was some kind of alien or something?" Greyman asked.

"Could be. Don't know. All I do know is he—whatever he was—wasn't human. Could be a demon, or something like that, or something worse. He was carrying that ball, and that ball is evil, that's for sure."

"Why didn't you get rid of it?" Father Greyman asked.

"After that I tried. It scared me, scared me something fierce. I went to the lake and rented a boat from Mr. Loomney. I drove it out to the deepest part. I had meant to drop it, but I couldn't do it. It was just . . . It was so beautiful. It was mine. I found it. Why should I? I paddled back to back to shore. There were things to do. So many things, so little time."

"I shot Mr. Loomney. He wanted the eight-ball, I could tell. I tied him up with weights from his house and went out and threw him in the middle of the lake." The sheriff paused again. He looked again at what he had pulled out of

his pocket, as if fondling it gave him the strength to speak. "I went back home. Kristen wasn't home. I knew where she was. I knew she was with *him*. That was ok, though. I wanted to dig the graves first. The eight-ball had wanted really. It was the eight-ball that said that Mr. Loomney had to die. It was the eight-ball that said to dig the graves then. It was the eight-ball that told me that she was off shnapping my deputy, my best friend.

"The digging didn't take too long, since it rained so hard the night before. I dug two big holes, and then smiled. It had felt *right*.

"I went to his house and found her car outside. I snuck upstairs to his bedroom, past the living room where me and 'im had spent so many nights drinking beers and smoking cigars, where we had watched the last ten super bowls together, and walked upstairs. I heard them before I got there. I heard Kristen screaming. She hadn't screamed like that in years, or at least hadn't with me. I drew my gun and opened the door. 'Oh my God!' She cried as I entered, 'It's not what you . . . ' I shot her before she could finish the sentence. Her naked body fell backwards off the bed and onto the floor.

"Oh my God! I . . . I . . . Don't shoot me please!' Walt said to me. I shot him six times, just like the eight-ball said to. I couldn't move the bodies 'till nightfall. I had brought the truck, but it would have been a little conspicuous then. It was fine though. I just sat there at the end of the bed, staring at the eight-ball till the sun went down. It was just so goddamn beautiful.

"When night did come I used garbage bags to slide their bodies down. The stairs were the tricky part. I lost control of Kristen and she went tumbling down. By the time I had lifted both of them into the truck it was nearly twelve-thirty. I drove slowly on the way home. Mike was on that night and he always got a power trip by pulling me or one of the other deputies over. This would of given him a fricken' orgasm." The Sheriff laughed again.

Father Greyman was nearly shivering with terror in his seat. He silently prayed as the sheriff continued on.

"Protection from me?"

*So it's true, he can read . . .*

"Yes I can *read thoughts*. That's what I've been trying to tell you. Anyways, where was I? I told everyone that Walt's mother had taken ill where she lived in Phoenix. Kristen's sister was pregnant in Florida, so I said she was there helping out. Everyone bought it."

He just had to give the man forgiveness and he could leave, and this nightmare would be all over. "Good idea," he said, thinking he should say something.

"Oh it wasn't mine; it was the eight-ball's. It thinks of everything. And Mr. Loomney was easy, 'cus I'm investigating his disappearance." The sheriff starred down again and a smile spread across his face.

"Why are you telling me all this?" It was an absurd question. He was told all sorts of crazy confessions everyday, but this was different. This was wrong. It was all a lie, it had to be. Lies from a crazy man, yeah, that was it.

*A crazy man that read your thoughts.*

Yes, that was hard to deny, but that could be know more than a cheap parlor trick.

"I'm not crazy!" The sheriff yelled, "And they're not lies."

"Stop that, Stop that. Why are you telling me this?"

"Because the eight-ball says your next." The sheriff said. He lifted the gun up that he had been staring at the entire time, and pulled the trigger.

\* \* \*

The priest made much more noise when he died then the coroner had. Man, did he hate that noise.

"All in a days work." He said, smiling. Then sighed, "So much to do, so little time."

He pocketed the gun and pulled out the eight-ball. He would have to leave soon. He *should* leave immediately, but first he wanted to look at it for a little while. It was just so beautiful.

So damn beautiful.



Soon, he would drive a long needle into her side to release pressure building in a corpse too valuable to risk an explosive blow-out. In life, she had been no beauty in any sense of the word.

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# SKIN DEEP

R. S. Pyne

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THE CORPSE LAY ON ITS BACK, submerged in a private pool dug in the floor; young, morbidly obese in life—now more like a human shaped bar of soap than a man. Graying lips turned upward at each corner as if enjoying a joke, closed eyelids sunken and coated with white flakes. Once, he had a name, a career, prospects; all that forgotten now. Number Three died a long time ago, his body's almost magical transformation years in completion

Adipocere to give the gray-white grave wax its proper scientific name, formed steadily from the first month after death, dehydrating surrounding non-fatty tissues so bacterial growth declined. An entire body needed time to mature, periods of undisturbed repose. The process worked most efficiently in the absence of oxygen under cool, humid conditions in damp soil, lake-bottom mud or a sealed casket. By coincidence, ideal conditions could also be found in the cellar of thirty-one Pentre Street, the final site chosen after many false starts. The master of all he surveyed, the terrace house's main occupant now spent more time in his cellar than any other room, but he had a reason to be attentive.

Dr. Burke Leidy PhD Cardiff 2002, MSc Cambridge, Fellow of the Royal Society and Association of Independent Researchers, supplied a high quality product with a long list of buyers clamoring for more. His aunt's obsession with anti-wrinkle cream gave him the idea that some people would put anything on their face. Scorpion venom, shark collagen, human placenta extracts, South American arrow frog slime, why not grave wax? It was a perfect moisturizer, especially when combined with sweet almond oil, avocado, lavender and chamomile; the name in large gold letter on

every pot.

Eradicepo Miracle Balm was not available in any shop and by personal recommendation only.

It worked wonders on mature and not so mature skin, more than just an over-hyped placebo in fancy packaging. Two hundred and fifty in cash for two months supply.

No checks or cards taken. Strictly payment on delivery, he accepted no credit notes or Lady's Agreement. There would always be obesity in the world and people with creases.

Leidy offered a way to bring the two together in an easily applied form.

In 1993, classic studies by Tyler O'Brien into adipocere formation in water found that most bodies it developed two to three inches above and two to three inches below the waterline. Subject number three was more obliging; his entire body saponified until he looked exactly like Philadelphia's soapy son and daughter. The Soap Lady, an overweight woman buried in the nineteenth century, could now be seen in the Mutter Museum of the College of Physicians, on display since 1874. Her companion in death, The Soap Man, passed from the University of Pennsylvania's Wistar and Horner Museum to the Smithsonian still wearing his expensive burial stockings.

Burke Leidy visited them both, reading every research paper he could find on the subject. There were many, their authors never considering the practical application of adipocere as a modern woman's beauty treatment.

He also spoke to a laboratory technician looking for someone who could be both business partner and financial sponsor. The tech ended as the first test subject, even if he



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never volunteered for that dubious honor. Nobody missed an insignificant if fleshy Christian far from home, with no family and few vices. Volatile fatty acids did their work, producing enough adipocere for initial testing. A long term vegetarian, Leidy advertised for human testers, determined no rats and rabbit would suffer on his account.

Posing as a private clinic with accreditation he had no rights to, he used his past life as an organic biochemist to further refine the product for therapeutic use. Carefully selected pure essential oils masked any trace odor of rendered fat, and the balm worked. Deeply seated lines and wrinkles smoothed noticeably, the effects permanent during treatment, wearing off slowly for a four week period of grace.

Stop using it and the wrinkles always returned with reinforcements. He let his clients find this out for themselves, confident of their repeat business. The panicked phone calls always came.

The man behind it all threw his soiled gloves in the trash bucket. Took out a double bagged sandwich and ate lunch with the dead. Tomato, cheese and pickle on granary bread, no butter, a ripe peach dripping juice – quickly wiped away to avoid contamination. Born with a strong stomach, a cast iron constitution and a weak sense of smell, he enjoyed sitting with his own thoughts. Corpses made few demands; did not constantly take up time with triviality. They had passed that stage, lying quiet in their improvised cradles. Like a fine wine, the adipocere matured slowly, every waxy paring worth more than its weight in gold.

Emma, on the other hand, was not the finest vintage; demanding, jealous of any time he spent away from her. A phone, perched on top of a box half full of Eradicepo Miracle Balm pots, mute only because he switched it off during communion with his product. Work came first – everything else could be switched off and on like the mobile. He loved her in his own way: for her body – not for her mind, best described as a stagnant puddle filled by shopping, spiteful gossip and reality television.

“You bitch,” he said and poured himself a cup of rum laced coffee to keep out the chill. Ordinarily, he did not drink while working near the product. No objections from the dead but he could hear sounds of disapproval from a long line of tee-total ancestors.

Loudest in the chorus were the shrill, cracked reed voices of ‘Bloody Minded’ Mary and ‘Puritan’ Polly, two formidable spinster aunts who raised him according to their own self-taught views of child care. Both would turn in their graves to see him drinking at one o’clock in the afternoon, had they not still been in the land of the living and determined to stay that way. Burke Leidy grew up isolated and bookish, a strange boy whose only friends were fictional and his heroes were nineteenth century scientists instead of sports stars. Charles Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace, Thomas Huxley and others of that illustrious generation inspired, drove him on towards greatness.

“Bitch,” he muttered again and drank his coffee. “I can do a lot better than that lump. She has all the brains of an underdone egg custard and half the personality.”

‘I quite agree with you,’ number three appeared to say, grey-white face peaceful in repose, frozen forever into the ghost of a smile. He seemed only too pleased to be the main

ingredient.

‘I just like making people happy,’ he wrote on his letter of application to a weight loss clinic that did not exist. The next sentence guaranteed his inclusion in the program . . . ‘and I truly believe that beauty is more than just skin deep.’ Burke Leidy took that as a God granted sign and set up an interview the very next day. By telephone, nothing to leave a paper trail except an advert in a magazine that had folded months ago, its office gutted by suspected arson. Leidy did not suspect; he knew it was arson because he had poured the accelerant himself and lit the matches. Locard’s celebrated principle that every contact leaves a trace would not help in this case; no Crime Scene Investigator would ever identify his involvement from DNA, fingerprint, skin flake, impression or fiber. The file that listed his name, address and credit card details was ash, leaving only a few anonymous copies with a telephone number long since disconnected.

And so to work; he pulled on clean gloves, selecting his favorite spatula from a pristine roll of tools. Number Three did not object when Leidy scraped off a small curl of wax, waited for it to soften and then rubbed it into a fine network of wrinkles around his eyes. Skin-warmed grease absorbed quickly, even unrefined; more like coconut oil than a slick of degraded fat that had once been human. Clients who could not care less about their carbon footprint eagerly embraced the new miracle cream, recycling taken to the next level.

Now, he did not wait for the raw material to come to him, he went looking for them. Riskier, but it allowed him to be more selective.

Miracle Balm did not make itself, it took time and patience, a steady hand and someone who would do what needed to be done. Slow and sure, he dispatched his chosen victims with the minimum of fuss or effort, taking care to avoid excess tissue damage.

Whereas his first kill was that a novice, now he prided himself on his efficiency. Quality levels rose accordingly; the active ingredient increasing in potency when he strangled, fell sharply with gunshot or stabbing.

Poison never figured in the equation for obvious reasons; Bacteria broke down alcohol long before grave wax formed, but medicinal or recreational drugs ruined any harvest.

“I know you’re in there,” a strident voice fractured all peace as determined fists pounded on a double locked door. “What are you doing? I know you have another woman. Don’t deny it. I’ll kill her. Who is she?”

He had absolutely no idea.

Number twelve carried no identification and their relationship had been far too brief for names. Naked, her abdomen bloated with gaseous emissions from countless millions of bacteria.

Soon, he would drive a long needle into her side to release pressure building in a corpse too valuable to risk an explosive blow-out. In life, she had been no beauty in any sense of the word. A street walker specializing in clients who liked their women on the large side, she saw better days two decades ago and continued in the business because there was no other choice.

He had strangled slowly, gauging her worth as practiced hands squeezed away the last dregs of life. For some strange reason, the broad smile remained throughout the early post-

mortem changes. She grinned at the prospect of becoming an anti-wrinkle cream for rich ladies who, in life, would never have come so close to her.

"Give us a kiss, lover boy," the bold, gravel edged request came out of the air without ceremony.

Twelve's sense of humor persisted even after death. He had only just started to hear her voice and, as he pressed his lips to the taut forehead, he could almost hear her drink silvered laughter.

Emma did not believe in taking no for an answer.

"Don't you dare lie to me—I won't stand for it."

A determined kick followed.

He sighed and moved to the door, knowing he would get no more work done until she was satisfied.

"I wouldn't dream of it, my love," he said and slipped out of the workroom before his girlfriend's determined bulk breached the gap.

She tried, as, she always did, to look past him; suspicious. He could not let her into the cellar, a private domain he shared only with the quiet, still forms that were his fortune.

Impossible; she threatened everything with her small minded jealousy.

"I am working—alone. I told you there would never be anyone else, Emma. I love you . . . only ever you."

She snatched the peace offering, greedily ripped open the gold box and scooped up an extravagant amount of Eradicepo Miracle Balm.

Rendered adipocere caked her chewed nails and glistened on a face made for radio. As Burke watched, a pink slug tongue dealt with the excess; a habit that had always repulsed him especially now she was licking away dead people.

"Good enough to eat."

He forced a smile. "Yes, my love."

"It is quite addictive. At first, I had a little taste to see what it was like. Now I can't stop."

Her tongue found another slick of grease that had once been human.

She never had any self control.

Still slim and active at twenty, ten years later she gave up the constant battle and put on weight on a massive scale. She wore clothes made for women two sizes smaller, put peroxide on already tortured hair and wore too much makeup for her own good. Blubber around her bare midriff wobbled, pouring over her waistband as if in a determined effort to be rid of her.

Her face took on an acquisitive light, IQ temporarily raised above its usual blood heat. "And now I want fifty percent of your profits."

"Why?" He grew calmer, realizing she had not discovered the cellar's secret. A held breath hissed out between his teeth, but she repeated the percentage mantra-like and irritating. Not blackmail for she lacked the intelligence for that, only an opportunistic whim.

"Don't you love me? We're an item, Burke, and that means sharing."

"Fifty percent is rather excessive," he said, resenting the demand for a half-share in a business built from nothing.

All the risks his, murdering a dozen people did not come easily to a man who had never killed a cockroach

before. Emma had never felt the foul rush of air from a newly vented corpse. She had not manhandled subjects into their last resting places or disposed of semi-liquid putrid flesh when the process failed. She wanted to be rich without dirtying her hands and work was what other people did.

He watched the impromptu striptease and felt nothing but nausea.

Waves of expensive perfume wafted across the space as she parted company with her undergarments, the nude body even less attractive than usual. Whenever she wanted something from him, off went her clothes, as if that would seal the bargain. In her own mind, voluptuous, sensuous, seductive and any one of a dozen other things; anything except a fat woman on the wrong side of thirty who lost her allure years ago.

If ever she had any.

Looking at the cellulite dimpled thighs and the rolls of flab on her belly and hips with a clinical sense of detachment, he doubted it.

"Do we have a deal?" She smiled as if already planning on how to spend the money. The hall clock struck two, its chimes strident in the charged hush that now ruled there.

"No," he said, quiet, determined, as his hands closed around a surprised throat and began to squeeze. "I don't think so."

She gave a desperate gobble and tried to scratch her way free, but the close-bitten nails were useless. Burke Leidy continued to increase pressure as the voices he associated with subject number three and twelve whispered encouragement in his ear.

Others joined the chorus, welcoming a new addition to their ranks. Soon, she would lie in the shallow tank already prepared for her, overripe, all too plentiful flesh yielding up its gray-white gold in time and he had plenty of that.

All the time in the world, now she was no longer in it.

"Goodbye, Emma," he said and kissed her as the last trace of life ebbed away.

He loved her for her body, after all.





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